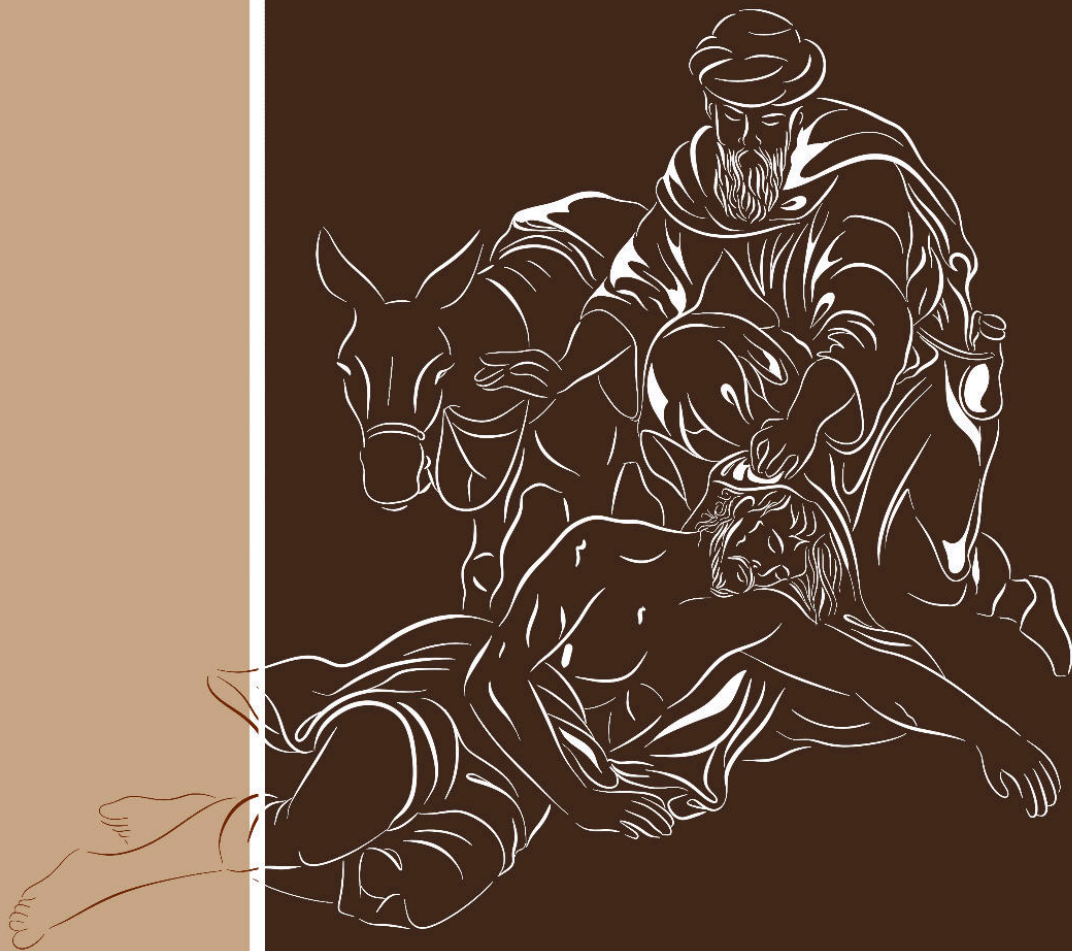


Service & Spirituality



SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

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Unit 1

CHAPTER

1.0 FOUNDATIONS OF SERVICE

Principles of a Servant - The Good Shepherd

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Before any of us stood before a class, a youth group, a home, or a hospital bed as a servant, someone else stood first. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Master of all and the Maker of all, bent Himself down to the dust of this world and became a servant within it. He washed feet with His own hands. He healed with His own touch. He spoke with people the world had long stopped listening to. And when at last He laid down His life for His sheep, He was not departing from His ministry — He was completing it. To enter the life of service, then, is not to take up a new project. It is to take up an old pattern, the oldest pattern there is, and to let the Lord of the sheep re-shape us into a likeness of Himself. In this lesson we will sit with the parable of the Good Shepherd in the tenth chapter of St. John, and we will meet three figures who each want to be near the flock: the door, the thief, and the shepherd. Only one of the three loves the sheep. The work of becoming a servant is the work, over a lifetime, of becoming that one.

The Master Who Came to Serve

The Christian idea of service is not a piece of ethics borrowed from the world's good manners. It is a revelation. It is the shape our Lord took when He stepped out of glory into history, and it is the shape He has asked every one of His followers to take ever after. The clearest verse in the whole New Testament about what service means does not come from St. Paul and does not come from a Father. It comes from Christ Himself, speaking of Himself:

“Even as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28, NKJV)

Every word of that sentence repays attention. He came. He was not compelled, He was not summoned, He did not arrive by accident; He came, freely, in love, because love is what the Father is. He did not come to be served, though He was the only Person in the universe with any right to be. He came to serve, and the word He chose for what He was doing is the word that in the ancient world meant the work of a slave. And He came to give His life a ransom for many — not a token service, not a shift of charitable hours, but a pouring out of Himself to the very end. Everything we will learn about service in this curriculum is a commentary on that one sentence.

On the night before He died, Jesus dramatized the teaching so that no future servant could ever forget it. He rose from supper, laid aside His outer garments, wrapped Himself in a towel, filled a basin with water, and knelt before the men who had been arguing all week about which of them was greatest. One by one He washed their feet. And when He had finished, He turned to them and said:

“You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.” (John 13:13–15, NKJV)

St. Cyril of Alexandria, looking at that scene, warns us not to walk past it as though we had understood it already:

“For it is not the knowledge of virtue, but rather the practice of it, that the blessed saint sets before us.” – St. Cyril of Alexandria, on John 13

The servant is not a student of service in the abstract. The servant is a doer. It is possible to know every principle in this book by heart and yet never once kneel, towel in hand, before the actual feet of a tired person. That would be to treat service as an idea, when the Lord gave it to us as a practice. The question the night of the foot-washing puts to us is not, “Do we understand?” The question is, “Are we willing to do as He has done?”

The Parable of the Good Shepherd (John 10)

Of all the parables our Lord spoke, the parable of the Good Shepherd appears only in the Gospel of St. John, and it stands apart from the rest because the central figure is not a farmer or a king or a merchant — it is the Lord Himself, describing His own heart toward us. He paints the scene in a few unforgettable strokes: a sheepfold, a door, a watchful gatekeeper, a flock of sheep who know one voice and no other, and three figures who want to be near that flock. The parable opens like this:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” (John 10:1–5, NKJV)

The details are not decorations. The door, the gatekeeper, the voice, the name — each of them is going to matter. And the three figures who show up across the rest of the chapter — the thief who climbs in where the shepherd walks, the hireling who flees when the wolf comes, and the Good Shepherd who lays down His life — are the three possible shapes a servant’s life can take. Two of them describe ways that service can go wrong; one of them describes the Lord Himself, and the servant He is slowly forming us to become. Let us take them in turn.

Christ the Door

Before our Lord describes the thief or the hireling or even Himself as the shepherd, He describes Himself as the door. It is an arresting image. A shepherd stands at the entrance of the pen; He is the

entrance of the pen. In the world of the parable, the sheepfold of the Lord's people has exactly one way in and one way out, and that way has a face and a name:

"I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." (John 10:9, NKJV)

This is not an incidental claim. It is the claim our Lord made of Himself once again in the Upper Room, a few nights before His death: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6, NKJV). Christ is not a path among paths. He is the only entry, and the exclusivity of that claim is not a gate slammed in the face of the world — it is a gate held wide open in front of it. Everyone who enters by Him is saved. No one is sent away for being the wrong kind of sheep.

And yet the Fathers heard a second meaning in "the door" as well. For St. John Chrysostom, the door through which the shepherd enters — the door that keeps the thieves out — is the Word of God itself. Anyone who comes to teach God's flock without coming through the door of Holy Scripture, rightly interpreted in the Church, is already climbing the wall. The sheep, for their part, are to be so familiar with the voice of the Lord in the Scriptures that they can tell in an instant when a stranger is speaking. St. Augustine holds the two meanings together in a single sentence:

"Remember that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Door and the Shepherd. He presents Himself as the Door in order to be revealed. He is the Shepherd too, who allows us to enter through Him." – St. Augustine, on John 10

For the servant, the practical lesson is simple and hard. Our authority to lead anyone anywhere is borrowed, not owned. We enter through the door ourselves — through Christ, through the Scriptures, through the sacramental life of His Church — and we bring the flock in by the same door, and in no other way. A servant who teaches what he did not receive, who leads by his own opinion rather than by the voice of the Lord, has already climbed the wall. He may not notice. The sheep will.

The Thief and the Hireling

Two figures in the parable do not love the sheep. They look different from each other, and they fail in different ways, but they share a single disease: they are in it for themselves. The Lord introduces the first without mincing words:

"The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." (John 10:10, NKJV)

The thief climbs in where the shepherd walks in. He enters by the window, the wall, the side gate — anywhere except the one door the Lord has appointed. His aim is the opposite of the shepherd's in every particular. The shepherd gives life; the thief takes it. The shepherd feeds; the thief plunders. The shepherd protects; the thief kills and destroys. In the ordinary life of the Church the thief rarely announces himself this baldly. He comes instead in the form of a teaching that flatters, a movement that excites, a voice that promises spiritual goods without the Lord's door — and he lives off the flock

while calling himself its friend. The Lord's warning against him is stark, and the way we are to recognize him is even starker: not by ever-cleverer argument, but by the voice we have grown so used to that the stranger's voice is immediately foreign.

The hireling is a subtler failure, and closer to home. He is not an enemy of the sheep. He simply does not love them. He has agreed to the job; he may be good at the job in easy weather; but his heart is fixed on what the job gives him rather than on the flock itself. St. John Chrysostom's summary of the difference cuts cleanly:

"In this the shepherd differs from the hireling: the one always looks to his own safety, caring not for the sheep; the other always seeks that of the sheep, neglecting his own."

– St. John Chrysostom, Homily on John 10

The hireling is found out when the wolf comes. As long as the sky is clear and the flock is quiet, he is indistinguishable from a true shepherd. But when the pressure arrives — when the defense of the truth costs something, when a wayward sheep needs to be gone after at personal cost, when a difficult conversation has to be had — he is gone. St. Gregory the Great notices that his flight is often not physical at all:

"He flees, not by change of place, but by withdrawing support. He flees, because he saw injustice and held his peace; he flies, because he conceals himself by silence." – St.

Gregory the Great, Homily 14 on the Gospels

This is the warning each of us should take most personally, because we are far more likely to become hirelings than thieves. The hireling does not wake up one morning and decide to abandon the sheep; he simply chooses comfort over love one small decision at a time, until the love that ought to have been his primary fuel is no longer there and he does not remember when it left. St. Paul diagnoses the condition in a single line that we should weigh against our own ministries honestly:

"For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 2:21, NKJV)

The question the hireling section of the parable puts to us is not, "Am I a bad person?" It is, "Who am I actually serving when I serve?" If the honest answer is our own comfort, our own reputation, our own sense of usefulness — the wolf has already arrived and we have not yet noticed.

The Marks of the Good Shepherd

Against the thief and the hireling the Lord draws His own portrait, and He uses the word "good" twice in a single breath — not because He is repeating Himself, but because He wants us to let the word sink in:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The

hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.” (John 10:11–14, NKJV)

The marks that follow from this self-description are the pattern for every Christian servant. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep by name — not as a roster, not as a program attendance list, but as persons whose particular weaknesses and histories and hopes He carries in His heart. He calls His sheep out one by one, and He leads them; He does not drive them from behind with a stick. He goes before them, which means He never asks of them a road He has not already walked Himself. He lays down His life for them. He gathers the weak ones and carries them. The prophet Isaiah had foreseen this tenderness seven hundred years in advance:

“He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.” (Isaiah 40:11, NKJV)

Each of these marks is also a diagnostic for our own service. Do we know the people we serve — their names, their homes, the specific shape of what they are struggling with this season? Do we lead the people we serve or do we push them? Do we go before them in what we are asking of them, or are we giving out a Christian life we have not actually chosen to live? And, hardest of all: are we willing to pay the cost — in time, in sleep, in emotional energy, in reputation — that loving these particular sheep is going to ask? The Old Testament speaks very pointedly to shepherds who answered no to these questions. Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord indicts the false shepherds of Israel in words that ought to stop the breath of every servant who reads them:

“The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.” (Ezekiel 34:4, NKJV)

The contrast with the Good Shepherd is total, and it is meant to be. The Lord has not asked us to manage a flock; He has asked us to love one, in the exact way He loves it.

The Sheep and the Voice They Know

It would be a mistake to read John 10 only as a portrait of the shepherd, because the parable is also about the sheep. We are the sheep. Nothing in Scripture is more humbling about the human condition than the images God chose to describe it: we are clay, we are dust, we are grass that withers, and we are sheep. Sheep are not fierce and they are not clever. They wander. They cannot defend themselves. They panic in the dark. They depend on the voice of a shepherd for everything from where to feed to where to drink to when to rest. St. Peter, writing as one who had once scattered himself at the first sign of a wolf, sums up the whole Christian condition in a line:

“For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” (1 Peter 2:25, NKJV)

The central discipline of the sheep is listening. The parable says it twice: the sheep hear His voice, and they do not hear the voice of strangers. How does that hearing grow? In the ordinary ways the Church has always taught — by daily Scripture, by the cycle of the Agpeya, by the Divine Liturgy, by Confession, by time with a father of confession, by the hymns of the Church that carry doctrine in their bones. The more the voice of the Lord fills our ears, the more foreign the voice of the stranger sounds when he calls. The servant who wants to lead others to the Shepherd's voice must first become a sheep who knows that voice himself. There is no shortcut past this.

Our Lord promises His sheep a specific kind of freedom — the freedom to go in and go out and find pasture. The servant who has learned to trust the Shepherd's voice is not a sheep in a cage; he is a sheep in a field. He is safe because the Shepherd is near, and he is free because the Shepherd is good. St. Gregory of Nyssa turns the whole picture back into a prayer the Church has prayed ever since:

“Show me the green pastures. Lead me to the still waters. Guide me to filling food. Call me by my name, so that I may hear your voice. I am your sheep: grant me eternal life.”

– St. Gregory of Nyssa, on the Song of Songs

Let that be our prayer, and let us carry it into the ministry we have been given. The servants the Lord is forming through this curriculum are sheep who have learned His voice and are beginning, by grace, to sound a little like Him when they call their own sheep by name. Let us go in and go out and find pasture — and let us bring with us every sheep we can, through the one Door, to the one Shepherd who has laid down His life so that there may be one flock and one Shepherd forever.

Review Questions

1. Christ calls Himself both the Door and the Good Shepherd in the same chapter (John 10). Why both? What does each image teach us about the servant's calling that the other image alone could not teach?
2. Most of us will not be tempted to become thieves. We will be tempted to become hirelings. In the life of a servant today — in a classroom, a youth meeting, a home visit, a hospital — what does “fleeing by withdrawing support” (St. Gregory the Great) actually look like, and how do we guard against it?
3. The Good Shepherd “calls His own sheep by name.” What does it practically mean to know the people we serve by name — not only their names, but their histories, their weaknesses, and their present season? Which of the people the Lord has given us have we not yet taken the trouble to know in this way?
4. St. John Chrysostom reads “the door” as the Word of God and the Scriptures, rightly interpreted in the Church. How well do we know the voice of the Lord in the Scriptures ourselves, and how is that knowledge shaping what we teach others?
5. Ezekiel's indictment of the false shepherds (Ezekiel 34:4) is painfully specific: the weak not strengthened, the sick not healed, the broken not bound up, the lost not sought. Reading that

list slowly and honestly, which of these corresponds to the work the Lord has placed in our hands right now, and what is one concrete thing we will do this week in response?

Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 20:28; John 10:1–16, 27–28; John 13:13–15; John 14:6; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:1–16; Psalm 23; Philippians 2:21; 1 Peter 2:25; Hebrews 13:20 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, on John 13.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, on John 10.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractates 45–47.
- St. Gregory the Great, Homily 14 on the Gospels (on the Good Shepherd).
- St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Song of Songs.
- St. Clement of Rome, First Epistle to the Corinthians, on workmen of Christ.
- Friday Theotokia and Psalm 23, as prayed in the Agpeya tradition.

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

Lesson Notes

What Is Expected of a Servant

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Having seen in the previous lesson who our Master is — the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep — we now turn to the question His example presses upon us: what does He expect of the ones He has called to serve with Him? The New Testament is not shy about answering. In the Pastoral Epistles especially, the Holy Spirit through St. Paul sketches for us a portrait of the Christian servant: a person grounded in the Scriptures, taught by heavenly wisdom, upright in conduct, clear in speech, steady in zeal, and always aiming not at a crowd of hearers but at a chain of disciples. None of these expectations is a standard to be reached by ourselves; each of them is a work of grace that the Lord is willing to perform in any servant who asks for it. In this lesson we will walk through six of these expectations in turn, so that when we stand before the children, the youth, or the inquirer, we will know what kind of people the Lord is quietly making us into as we serve.

Called by the Servant-King

The first expectation the Lord places on every servant is the one He placed on Himself. He does not begin by handing us a list of duties; He begins by handing us His own life as the pattern. Two of His disciples had approached Him through their mother, asking for thrones at His right and left hand. The other ten were indignant. And into that argument about greatness, the Lord spoke the sentence that has defined Christian service ever since:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25–28, NKJV)

The vocabulary is striking. The Lord does not forbid greatness among His disciples; He redirects it. He does not tell them to be small. He tells them that the road to true greatness runs in the opposite direction from the one the world has been pointing them down. And then He points to Himself as proof. He is the Son of Man. He is greater than any of them will ever be. And He has spent His whole ministry on the underside of human life, where the tired and the sick and the ashamed have gathered, because that is where service goes.

If that is what Christ Himself embraced, what should we expect of ourselves? St. Paul answers for us, writing to his young disciple St. Timothy who was entering the work of the service:

“Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation,

to doctrine. 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.” (1 Timothy 4:12–14, NKJV)

Every phrase of that charge deserves a slow reading, because each phrase is a facet of the single jewel called the servant’s life. An example in word — our speech is to teach even when we are not teaching. An example in conduct — our lives are to match what our mouths say. An example in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity — these are not character traits optional to ministry; they are the minimum soil in which ministry can grow. Then come the disciplines: reading, exhortation, doctrine. And behind all of it is the reminder that the gift we carry was given through the laying on of hands, through the Church, by the Spirit — it is not ours to squander. The servant’s life begins here: called by the Servant-King, charged with His example, entrusted with His gift.

Grounded in the Word

If we are to speak for the Lord, we had better first let the Lord speak to us. The first expectation after calling is Scripture. A servant who does not know the Word of God well has almost nothing of eternal value to give, no matter how naturally gifted he may be as a speaker or how charming she may be with the children. The treasury we dispense must first fill our own hearts:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” (Colossians 3:16, NKJV)

Note the words St. Paul chose. He did not say, let the word of Christ visit you occasionally. He said dwell — take up residence, settle in, become a permanent household member of the heart. And not only dwell, but dwell richly, as a houseguest who has unpacked every suitcase. That kind of indwelling is what qualifies us to teach one another at all, because the teaching that follows (“teaching and admonishing one another”) is the overflow of a heart that is already full. An empty heart has nothing to overflow.

Scripture is not merely our favorite source; it is our only God-breathed source, and therefore it sits in a category of its own among all the books a servant will ever read:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17, NKJV)

The four purposes St. Paul names — doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction — are almost a description of the work of service itself. Doctrine teaches what is true; reproof names what has gone wrong; correction sets it right; instruction trains in the way of righteousness. The servant who knows the Scriptures has all four of these in his hand every time he opens the Bible. The servant who does not is working with a toolbox that is mostly empty.

But knowing the Word is not a task that ends when we graduate from Sunday School or seminary. It is a lifelong pursuit that even the greatest of the apostles refused to lay down. In the last letter St. Paul

ever wrote, from a Roman prison, awaiting the executioner's sword, he made a final request of St. Timothy:

"Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come — and the books, especially the parchments." (2 Timothy 4:13, NKJV)

Let us feel the weight of that sentence. Paul has preached for more than thirty years. He has been caught up to the third heaven and heard words unlawful to utter. He has written most of the letters that now form half the New Testament. He is, in the most literal sense, a man whose own words are Scripture. And with weeks to live, he asks for books. The Fathers noticed and would not let us forget. St. John Chrysostom returns to this habit of the servant over and over in his preaching:

"When you immerse your mind and heart in spiritual books, you will always be filled, for spiritual reading gives you a foundation in God." – St. John Chrysostom, Third Homily on Lazarus

And Theophan the Recluse, summarizing centuries of monastic wisdom, refuses to let us treat reading as a luxury for those who have time:

"One must read, for this is an ascetical activity." – Theophan the Recluse, The Path to Salvation

Ascetical — that is, a discipline, an exercise, a labor of the soul. Reading Scripture and the Fathers is not recreation for the servant; it is training. The servant who does not read grows thin, and a thin servant cannot feed anyone. Before we expect to feed others, let us be sure we have been fed.

Taught by the Spirit

Reading, however, is not yet enough. There are professors of theology in every great university who can parse the Greek of the New Testament better than most of us will ever read English, and who nevertheless do not believe one word of what the text says. Information is not the same as wisdom, and wisdom is not the same as heavenly wisdom. The servant needs the third of those, and only the third will do.

St. Paul draws the line sharply between a wisdom that is of this world and a wisdom that is given from above:

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual." (1 Corinthians 2:12–13, NKJV)

Earthly wisdom is real; we are not called to despise it. A servant who prepares a lesson on a historical book of the Old Testament and neglects to learn what little archaeology can tell us about its world has cheated the children. But earthly wisdom cannot, by itself, reach the places in a hearer's soul that only God has ever seen. It can describe the outside of a lamp; it cannot light it. For that, we need the

wisdom the Holy Spirit teaches — the habit of comparing spiritual things with spiritual, of letting Scripture interpret Scripture, of letting the mind of Christ (which we have, by grace) shape the mind we bring to our preparation.

This is why St. Paul refuses to separate preaching from wisdom. The Gospel he preached was not merely news; it was news handled wisely, so that it could do its saving work in every hearer:

“Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” (Colossians 1:28, NKJV)

Notice the three “every man”s. Wisdom is not a gift for our own private satisfaction; wisdom is what makes it possible to address every man, which is to say, each particular person with a particular story and a particular wound. The servant who has only one style of speaking has wisdom for one kind of hearer. The servant whom the Spirit has trained begins to find that the right word for the child, the right word for the teenager, the right word for the grieving parent, and the right word for the visiting unbeliever are not the same word — and that this is not a problem but a grace.

And since wisdom always travels with faith and truth, the servant must hold both. St. Paul describes his own ministry in precisely these terms: “a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth” (1 Timothy 2:7, NKJV). Faith keeps us warm; truth keeps us accurate. The Lord has joined them, and we dare not put them asunder. The servant’s lesson is to be reviewed for sound doctrine before it is carried into the classroom, because the same St. Paul who described his teaching as full of faith also warned his disciple against a ministry that has drifted from the truth:

“As I urged you when I went into Macedonia — remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine.” (1 Timothy 1:3, NKJV)

A loving servant with a false doctrine will harm the flock more than a crude servant with a true one. The expectation, then, is that we will work to be both: warm in faith and clear in truth, both taught by the Spirit.

The Life That Matches the Word

It is possible to know the Scriptures, to have heavenly wisdom, and still to disqualify oneself from the service — by a life that does not match what the mouth is saying. The fourth expectation, therefore, is integrity, which is simply the old word for the condition in which one’s inner life and outer life are the same shape. St. Paul puts the danger plainly to the church at Rome:

“You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?” (Romans 2:21–23, NKJV)

The servant is not called to be sinless — no servant ever has been, and no servant ever will be this side of the resurrection — but the servant is called to be struggling, in actual practice, against the very sins

he is teaching others to struggle against. The lesson on prayer is hollow if the one giving it does not pray. The lesson on forgiveness is hollow if the one giving it refuses to forgive. The lesson on purity is hollow if the one giving it lives a double life. The children are not deceived for long; sooner or later the word and the life will be laid side by side, and the hearer will believe the life. This is the meaning of St. Paul's other charge to Timothy:

"If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed." (1 Timothy 4:6, NKJV)

The little phrase "which you have carefully followed" is the whole point. The good minister is the one whose teaching is a report from his own road. He does not hand out maps of a country he has never visited. And lest we be tempted to shrug this off, St. James closes the door on every easy escape:

"My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment." (James 3:1, NKJV)

Stricter. Not lighter. The servant stands in the place of the Master before the children, and the Master will ask what the servant did with that place. This is not a reason to run from the service — the Lord has called us, and we do not turn Him down — but it is a reason to enter the service with our eyes open and with a continual prayer on our lips that the life the Lord sees would match the life the children see. Integrity is not an achievement; it is a daily labor of keeping the two in alignment.

Persuasion, Parable, and the Reach of the Teacher

Next to integrity stands a quieter virtue that we sometimes forget to name: the labor of making ourselves understood. The Lord Himself took this labor seriously. He did not address the crowds in the technical idiom of the scribes. He spoke of sowers and seeds, of a lost coin and a lost sheep and a lost son, of a wedding feast and a pearl of great price. The Fathers read this as a deliberate pedagogical choice. St. Paul, who had every Pharisaic credential, made the same choice in his own ministry and was clear about why:

"Yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue." (1 Corinthians 14:19, NKJV)

Five intelligible words outweigh ten thousand unintelligible ones. That is the servant's arithmetic. A lesson overflowing with theological vocabulary that the children cannot carry home is a lesson that has not yet been taught. The servant's work is not finished when the words leave our mouths; it is finished when the words land in the hearer's heart. St. Gregory the Great, in the Pastoral Rule which shaped Christian ministry for a thousand years, made this principle the axis of an entire book:

"The same exhortation does not suit all, inasmuch as neither are all bound together by similarity of character. For the things that profit some often hurt others." – St. Gregory the Great, Pastoral Rule, Book III, Prologue

He then spends the rest of the book sketching forty pairs of contrasting hearers — the timid and the bold, the patient and the impatient, the joyful and the sad, the married and the celibate — and asking the shepherd to speak differently to each. That is persuasion in the patristic sense: not manipulation, not salesmanship, but the servant's care to bring the same eternal truth to this particular soul in a form it can receive. Applications, illustrations, stories, questions — these are not frills on top of a lesson; they are the bridges by which the lesson crosses from the servant to the hearer.

The Lord Himself has told us that, when we teach in this way, we do not teach alone and we do not teach small:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.” (John 14:12, NKJV)

Let us not miss what is promised there. The lowliest servant, faithfully teaching one Sunday School class in an unknown parish, stands on the same promise the apostles stood on. The Lord has not reserved “greater works” for saints in stained-glass windows. He has reserved them for anyone who believes. The labor of persuasion, the labor of finding the word that fits this hearer, is work the Lord Himself is pleased to multiply.

Zeal, Patience, and Disciples

The final expectation gathers up the first five and sends them forward in time. The servant is called not to a sprint but to a long obedience, and the fruit of that long obedience is not a crowd but a chain of disciples. Near the end of the letter in which he asked for the books, St. Paul gives St. Timothy what may be the clearest charge on zeal anywhere in the New Testament:

“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” (2 Timothy 4:2, NKJV)

In season, when the class is full and attentive and the lesson lands. Out of season, when only three children have come, when the sermon seems to have gone nowhere, when the ones we have served longest are the ones who have wounded us most. Preach the word. Convince, when reason will receive it. Rebuke, when rebuke will save a soul. Exhort, when the hearer needs heart. And do all of it with longsuffering — a word that literally means long-tempered, slow to give up on a person — and with teaching, that is, never weaponizing the service into a personal vendetta, always returning the hearer to the truth.

This is why attitude matters as much as aptitude. The servant with every gift but a brittle spirit will not last. The servant with modest gifts and a supple spirit will bear fruit for decades. St. Paul even envisions the community around the servant sharing in his labor, so that zeal is not left solitary:

“Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.” (Galatians 6:6, NKJV)

And at the end of the long obedience stands the true goal of the service, which our Lord named in His last commandment before He ascended:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:19–20, NKJV)

The Lord did not say, make hearers. He did not say, make students. He said, make disciples. A disciple is a hearer who has become a follower, and a follower who is becoming, by grace, a teacher in turn. This is why St. Paul, at the very end of his life, measures his ministry not by how many times he preached but by how many links the chain of discipleship has grown:

“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2, NKJV)

There are four generations in that single verse: Paul, Timothy, the faithful men, and the others also. The servant’s life is not a candle burning alone; it is a candle lighting other candles, and those candles lighting still others, until at last the room the Lord has asked us to fill is fully lit. May the Lord who called us find us, at the end, with our hands full of the disciples He has given us through our long labor — and may He count us among the good and faithful servants who have entered into the joy of their Lord.

Review Questions

1. In Matthew 20:25–28 the Lord does not forbid greatness among His disciples; He redefines it. In the service we have been given, what would it look like for us to pursue greatness on the Lord’s terms rather than on the world’s terms — and where in our ministry have we been tempted to confuse the two?
2. St. Paul, writing his last letter from a Roman prison, asked St. Timothy to bring him the books (2 Timothy 4:13). St. John Chrysostom and Theophan the Recluse both call spiritual reading an ascetical discipline. Honestly examining our own week, how much of our time goes to feeding our own soul before we attempt to feed others, and what one change could we make this month?
3. The servant needs earthly learning, heavenly wisdom, faith, and truth — all four (1 Corinthians 2:12–13; Colossians 1:28; 1 Timothy 2:7; 1 Timothy 1:3). Of these four, which is our strongest? Which is our weakest? And what would it mean for the weakest one to be strengthened in us this year?
4. Romans 2:21–23 and James 3:1 together describe the weight of integrity that the servant bears. Are there any lessons we teach regularly whose subject we ourselves are not currently struggling to live? What would it look like to bring our life back into alignment with that teaching — not by lowering the teaching, but by lifting the life?

5. The Lord's final commandment is to make disciples, not merely hearers (Matthew 28:19–20; 2 Timothy 2:2). Of the ones we are serving right now, who is the Lord beginning to shape into a future servant — and what step is ours to take this season to invest in that person specifically, so that the chain of discipleship continues through us?

Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 20:25–28; Matthew 28:18–20; John 14:12; Romans 2:21–23; 1 Corinthians 2:12–13; 1 Corinthians 14:19; Galatians 6:6; Colossians 1:28; Colossians 3:16; 1 Timothy 1:3; 1 Timothy 2:7; 1 Timothy 4:6, 12–14; 2 Timothy 2:1–2; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Timothy 4:2, 13; James 3:1 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Third Homily on Lazarus.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Second Timothy, on 2 Timothy 4.
- St. Gregory the Great, The Pastoral Rule (Regula Pastoralis), especially Book III on the diversity of hearers.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, On Christian Doctrine, Book IV (on the teacher's eloquence in service of the truth).
- Theophan the Recluse, The Path to Salvation, on reading as an ascetical activity.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, on humility and knowledge.
- Feed My Sheep (parish edition), chapters on the spirituality and preparation of the servant.

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

Lesson Notes

Love in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Everything we have learned so far about the servant — the Good Shepherd pattern, the expectations of Scripture and wisdom and integrity — rests upon one foundation, and without that foundation every other stone we lay will slide. St. Paul called that foundation love, and he devoted the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians to describing it in words the Church has never gotten over. In this lesson we will walk through that chapter with him, and we will let him ask us the question he asked them: not “What gifts do we have?” but “Have we love?” For if we serve without love, St. Paul says we are nothing — even with tongues of angels in our mouths and all the faith that can move mountains in our hearts. And if we serve with love, even the smallest ministry is a participation in what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have been doing from before the foundation of the world.

The Question the Service Puts to Us

Before we open 1 Corinthians 13, we should notice the question the New Testament keeps pressing on anyone who would serve. It is not, “Are we qualified?” and it is not, “Are we talented?” It is, “Can we love someone who is not our flesh and blood?” St. John, in his first epistle, refuses to let a disciple of Christ escape that question:

“For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another... He who does not love his brother abides in death.” (1 John 3:11, 14, NKJV)

The language is stark. Not hindered, not weakened, not diminished — abides in death. For St. John there is no middle country between love and death, because love is the life of God and those who refuse it refuse Him. And when St. John fills out what this love actually looks like, he does not reach for emotions. He reaches for the cross:

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” (1 John 3:16–18, NKJV)

The Greek word behind “love” in these verses is the word the whole New Testament reserves for the highest love there is: *agapé*. It is not romantic feeling, not friendly affection, not natural kinship. It is the love that the Father has for the Son and the Son for the Father, the love the Trinity has poured out upon a world that did not deserve it. The Fathers summarize its character in four marks: it is unconditional, it is sacrificial, it is willful, and it is limitless. That is the love to which every servant is called.

And when our Lord redefines who counts as a “brother” for whom this love is owed, He does not draw the circle narrowly:

“For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.”
(Matthew 12:50, NKJV)

The servant, then, is not merely asked to love the family members easy to love. The servant is asked to love every child of God the Lord entrusts to the service, and to do it in deed and in truth — not in warm feelings unaccompanied by action, but in action that may cost us something.

Ruth and the Shape of Love-in-Deed

Because love in deed is so easy to describe and so hard to recognize, the Lord has given us a short book at the hinge of the Old Testament almost entirely to show us what it looks like. Naomi has lost her husband and both her sons. She is old, she is a widow, she is emptied out. She sets her face back toward Bethlehem and tells her two daughters-in-law to return to their mothers’ houses. Orpah, after some tears, does exactly that; it is the rational choice. But Ruth — a Moabite, a foreigner, a woman with every reason to go home to her own people — says this:

“Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.” (Ruth 1:16–17, NKJV)

Notice that Ruth does not call this love. She does not have to. She lives it. She binds her future to Naomi’s; she leaves her country; she adopts Naomi’s God as her own. And the Lord honors her loyalty so fully that He threads her into the genealogy of His own Son: a Moabite widow becomes the great-grandmother of David, and through David, of Christ. Love in deed has this way of working forward through generations the lover cannot see.

The lesson for the servant is plain. We cannot love from a safe distance, and we cannot love abstractly. St. Augustine captured the principle in a single line that the Church has been quoting for sixteen centuries:

“Love cannot be idle; it is the most restless of all things.” – St. Augustine of Hippo,
Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Homily 7

If the service has gone cold, if the preparation has become mechanical, if the children’s faces have blurred into an undifferentiated crowd, the diagnosis is almost always the same: love has gone to sleep. Love cannot be idle. Wake it, and the whole ministry wakes with it.

Gifts Without Love: What 1 Corinthians 13 Strips Away

Now we are ready for 1 Corinthians 13, and for the shock St. Paul wants to deliver to the Corinthian church — and to us. The Corinthians were richly gifted. They had tongues, they had prophecy, they had

knowledge, they had faith. They were, by almost any measure we now use to evaluate a ministry, a successful church. And in the middle of his first letter to them, St. Paul stops the music and says this:

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:1–3, NKJV)

Let us not soften what he has said. Three times in three verses the same structure falls: a magnificent gift — and nothing. Eloquence without love is noise. Knowledge without love is zero. Even the martyr’s fire, without love, profits the martyr nothing. Gifts by themselves do not sanctify. Gifts by themselves do not save. St. Paul even warns, in his second letter to the same church, that gifts can be distributed on the other side of the battle line altogether: “even Satan transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:14–15, NKJV). The presence of a gift is no proof that the Giver is present. Only love bears that witness.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this very chapter, will not let his congregation escape the implication:

“Though one work ten thousand miracles, if he have not love, he shall profit nothing. For neither is there any gift so great as love; nor any, again, which abideth when love is not.” – St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on First Corinthians, Homily 32

This is the hinge on which the whole lesson turns. The work the Lord is doing in the servant is not, first of all, the multiplication of gifts. It is the formation of a loving heart. Gifts without that heart are a chandelier with no current running through it — all glass and brass, no light.

The First Love: Loving God Before We Serve

If love is the one indispensable thing, where is it to be found? Not in ourselves, first. We do not generate agapé out of our own natural kindness, because our natural kindness has limits and agapé does not. Love begins in God, and it reaches us because He reached us first:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16, NKJV)

That sentence is not decoration. It is the source code of Christian service. The Father loved; the Father gave; the Son came. Our ministry is a downstream current of that original giving. This is why the Lord, when He restored St. Peter to the service after the three denials, did not begin by asking, “Have you prepared?” or “Are you ready?” He began with a single question, asked three times beside the Sea of Tiberias:

“So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Feed My lambs.” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend My sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep.”” (John 21:15–17, NKJV)

The Fathers have long drawn attention to a detail hidden in the Greek. The first two times the Lord asks, He uses the verb *agapáo* — do you love Me with sacrificial, limitless love? Peter, still chastened by his denials, cannot claim so much; he answers with the gentler verb *philéo* — Lord, You know I have affection for You. The third time, the Lord descends to Peter’s own word: do you at least have affection for Me? And Peter is grieved, because the Master has reached the floor of his capacity. Yet the Lord does not wait until Peter’s love has grown to *agapé* before He entrusts him with the sheep. Three times over, the answer is the same: Feed My lambs. Tend My sheep. Feed My sheep. The Lord accepts the love the servant can give, and He uses the service itself to grow the servant into the higher love He has prepared for him.

There is great comfort in that scene. The Lord does not demand perfect love before He gives us perfect work. He calls us at whatever register our hearts can presently sustain, and He teaches us, through the actual labor of feeding His lambs, to love Him and them with a fuller love. The precondition of service is not that we love God perfectly. The precondition is that we turn our face toward Him and begin.

Love as a Choice, Love as a Road

Because love does not begin at its full height, the servant has to understand it as both a choice and a road. It is a choice because it begins with an act of the will; it is a road because that act has to be renewed every day, and because along the way love is shaped by the Holy Spirit into something the servant could not have produced on the first day.

Our Lord made love a commandment at the Last Supper, which tells us immediately that love is something we can choose to obey:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34–35, NKJV)

A commandment is not addressed to feelings. Feelings cannot be commanded; they can only be noticed. A commandment is addressed to the will. Our Lord is telling His disciples that love, for them, is a decision to be made and re-made — a decision to wash one another’s feet when they would rather argue about greatness, a decision to forgive when the tongue is sharp, a decision to stay at the side of a tired person when every other instinct is pulling toward the door.

And what does that decision, made day by day, actually look like? St. Paul draws the portrait — perhaps the most famous portrait in the whole Bible:

“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:4–7, NKJV)

Every line of that paragraph is a picture of Christ, and every line is also an examen for the servant. Suffering long: do we still have patience for the child who disrupts every class? Kind: are we gentle at the end of a long day or only at the beginning? Not envious: can we rejoice when a younger servant teaches better than we do? Not parading itself, not puffed up: is our service quiet enough for God to see? Not seeking its own: whose kingdom are we actually building? Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things: have we given up on anyone the Lord has not yet given up on?

This is why the Fathers call love a road and not a single moment. It is not reached all at once. St. John Cassian, gathering the wisdom of the desert in his Conferences, fixes the servant’s eye on this gradual ascent:

“Whatever can help to guide us to this scope, namely, purity of heart, we must follow with all our might; but whatever hinders us from it, we must shun as a dangerous and hurtful thing. For it is for this that we do and endure all things.” – St. John Cassian, Conferences I (Abba Moses), ch. 5

Purity of heart is the name Cassian gives to the ground in which love finally grows, and he insists that the whole of the Christian life — reading, fasting, prayer, silence, service — exists to clear that ground of weeds. Love is not a feeling we either have or do not have; love is the high country the servant climbs toward, one chosen step at a time, while the Holy Spirit cuts the path and makes the slope bearable.

The One Thing That Does Not Pass Away

St. Paul ends the thirteenth chapter with a verdict that the servant should carry into every lesson prepared and every visit paid:

“Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away... And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:8, 13, NKJV)

The Corinthians treasured the spectacular gifts — tongues and prophecy and healing. St. Paul tells them, without contempt, that those gifts have an expiration date. They belong to this age, the age of the partial and the fragmentary, the age in which we know in part and prophesy in part. When the Lord comes and all things are made new, most of what we now take pride in will simply no longer be needed. There will be no more tongues because there will be no more language barrier between the

saints. There will be no more prophecy because all things will be open and seen. There will be no more teaching as we now know it, because “they shall all be taught by God” (John 6:45, NKJV).

But love — love does not expire, because love is what God is. St. John, the apostle of love, says so plainly: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16, NKJV). Love is not one of God’s many activities; love is His life, the eternal self-giving of the Father to the Son, of the Son to the Father, of both in the Holy Spirit. Everything we do that is done in love is therefore a participation, however small, in the inner life of the Trinity. That is why love alone crosses the bridge into eternity. The rest of what we carry will be left at the riverbank.

Let this be the lens through which we measure our service. Not: how many children came this year? Not: how many lessons did we teach? Not: how many compliments did we collect? But: did the children encounter the love of Christ through us? Did the lesson carry love in every line? Did our life bear witness, in deed and in truth, that we abide in the Love that laid down its life for us?

If the answer is yes — however haltingly, however imperfectly — then the service has done what the Lord asked it to do. And the love we have tried, with trembling, to give, will outlast us and outlast the children we served and outlast even the building in which we served them. It will enter the Kingdom with us, because it is the one thing in us that already belongs there. May the Lord, who is love, fill us with Himself, so that the service we have been given may be full of Him — and may we, with Ruth and Peter and Paul and all the servants who have gone before us, abide in that love forever.

Review Questions

1. 1 John 3:16–18 tells us not to love “in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” Reading slowly over the last month of our service, where has our love been mostly in word, and where has it crossed into deed? What is one concrete deed the Lord is nudging us to do this week for someone we have been loving only from a distance?
2. St. Paul’s three “I am nothing” sentences (1 Corinthians 13:1–3) assume that even great gifts, exercised without love, are worthless. Which of our own gifts is most at risk of being exercised without love — our teaching, our knowledge, our organizational ability, our visibility? What would it look like to bring that gift back under love’s rule?
3. By the Sea of Tiberias the Lord accepted the love Peter could give at that moment, even though it was not yet agapé, and He still entrusted him with the sheep (John 21:15–17). Is there a way in which we have been refusing to serve because we fear our love for the Lord is not yet “enough”? What might it mean to begin feeding His lambs at the register of love we have today?
4. Walk slowly through 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 as a mirror for our service. Which line most exposes us (patience, kindness, not envying, not seeking our own, bearing and believing and hoping all things, enduring)? What would it cost us, this year, to let the Lord heal that line in us?
5. St. John Cassian calls purity of heart the ground in which love grows, and calls every practice of the Christian life a tool for clearing that ground. Which passion in our own heart most often

“chokes” our love for the people we serve, and what discipline is the Lord asking us to take up — or put down — to give love room to grow?

Books & References

Scripture: Ruth 1:16–17; Matthew 12:46–50; John 3:16; John 13:34–35; John 21:15–17; 1 Corinthians 13 (entire chapter); 2 Corinthians 11:14–15; 1 John 3:11–18; 1 John 4:7–21 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on First Corinthians, Homilies 32–34 (on 1 Corinthians 13).
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John, especially Homily 7 (“Love, and do what you will”).
- St. John Cassian, Conferences I (Abba Moses), on the scope and end of the monastic life as purity of heart.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, on the merciful heart.
- St. Maximus the Confessor, Four Hundred Chapters on Love.
- H.G. Bishop Youssef, Patristic Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (on 1 Cor. 13).
- Feed My Sheep (parish edition), chapter on the love of the servant.

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

Lesson Notes

Responsibilities in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

We have looked at the shepherd-heart our Lord modeled for us, at the long list of expectations the New Testament lays upon the servant, and at the love without which none of those expectations can be met. It remains for us to walk the road on which all of this is tested, which is the road of daily responsibility. Responsibility is not a temperament. Some of us were born neat and others disorderly, some eager and others cautious, but the sense of duty that keeps a servant showing up for the children week after week for ten years is not inherited — it is formed. In this lesson we will watch the Scripture teach us what responsibility looks like in a servant: not as a single virtue, but as a whole posture of the soul that the Holy Spirit shapes in us over a lifetime. We will see it in Adam and in David, in the Samaritan and in Nehemiah, in the Prodigal on the road home and in our Lord Himself on the hillside surrounded by five thousand hungry people. In each place the same truth stands: responsibility is what love looks like when it has work to do.

Responsibility as a Choice: The Two Postures of Adam

Responsibility is not something we catch; it is something we choose. And because it is chosen, every one of us is capable of it on our best days and capable of evading it on our worst. Scripture makes this plain in its very first chapters, where the same man, Adam, is shown to us twice — once in responsibility and once in flight from it.

In the garden, when the Lord brought the woman to him, Adam's response was not a shrug. It was poetry and covenant:

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." (Genesis 2:23, NKJV)

That is what responsibility sounds like when it is whole. She is mine; I am hers; we are one flesh; I will stand for her and she for me. Not a word is wasted on what she owes him; his opening sentence is what he owes her. Responsibility always begins, in its healthy form, with the question, What belongs to me to care for?

But only a chapter later the same man, having sinned, meets his Creator in the cool of the day and gives an answer whose grammar tells the whole story:

"The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate."
(Genesis 3:12, NKJV)

"The woman whom You gave." Three separate arrows of blame in a single sentence: at the woman, at the Lord, at the circumstances. The man who a chapter earlier sang of his covenant bride as bone of

his bones now stands at a safe distance from her and from his Creator, and points. Nothing has changed about Adam's capacity; what has changed is his nearness to God. Responsibility is the natural speech of a soul in communion with its Maker, and blame is the natural speech of a soul in hiding. The servant's first task, every morning, is to decide which of those two postures the day will be lived in.

Rooted in Godliness: The Two Davids

If Adam shows us the two postures side by side in a single life, David shows us the same truth stretched across a lifetime. When David was a boy with a sling and the Lord's name on his lips, his sense of responsibility for his father's sheep was total. He tells Saul exactly how total when the giant is mocking Israel in the valley of Elah:

"Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear..." (1 Samuel 17:34–36, NKJV)

That is responsibility grown into courage. A single lamb in the jaws of a predator is enough to send him into the fight, because the flock is his to guard. No one would have blamed the boy for letting one lamb go. He blamed himself, and went.

The same David, years later, saunters onto his palace roof one evening when the kings are out at war, sees what he should not be looking at, sends for her, takes her, and when the inconvenient pregnancy threatens to surface, arranges her husband's death in battle (2 Samuel 11). It is the same man. What changed was not his personality. What changed was his nearness to God. A soul close to the Lord reaches out to protect; a soul at a distance reaches out to consume. St. John Chrysostom, commenting on this terrible collapse, refuses to separate David's ethics from his prayer life:

"When the soul neglects prayer, even the most righteous will fall; and when the soul keeps watch with God, even the weakest will stand." – St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, XIV

The servant, then, cannot treat responsibility as a skill to be drilled into the will. It has to be watered by the life of prayer, the life of the sacraments, the life of the Scriptures. Cut off from those streams, even a faithful servant will, in time, begin to act like the later David. Fed by those streams, even a shy servant will, in time, begin to act like the younger one.

It Does Not Wait for an Invitation

Responsibility as the Lord shapes it in us does not wait to be asked. A servant whose sense of duty kicks in only after being directly instructed has not yet received the full gift. True responsibility sees the need first, and moves.

Our Lord told the story most clearly in the parable of the Good Samaritan. A priest passed by on the other side. A Levite passed by on the other side. And then:

“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”
(Luke 10:33–34, NKJV)

No one gave the Samaritan an assignment. No one stopped him on the Jericho road and said, You are in charge of this man. He saw. He had compassion. He went. The whole parable is an argument that neighborliness is not determined by the roster but by the sight. The Fathers heard the parable and saw in the Samaritan the face of Christ Himself, who found humanity bleeding on the road of this world and stopped and bound up our wounds; and they urged every Christian to read the parable as a calling. St. Cyril of Alexandria put it this way:

“The Samaritan did what neither priest nor Levite did, and showed thereby that the law of love is higher than the letter of office. Whoever has eyes to see a wounded brother has already been made his neighbor.” – St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Homily 68

Scripture doubles the lesson for us by giving us Nehemiah, a lay servant with no priestly title, no prophetic office, no political rank above cupbearer in a foreign court. When a brother arrives from Judah and reports that the walls of Jerusalem are broken and the gates are burned, Nehemiah’s first response is this:

“So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” (Nehemiah 1:4, NKJV)

No one had asked Nehemiah to take this on. The king had not sent him. The priests had not summoned him. But a servant whose heart is open to God takes responsibility for what breaks God’s heart. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem begins not with a royal decree but with a layman weeping in Susa. And this is the pattern the servant is called to carry into the parish: when we see something in our ministry that has gone soft — a class that has lost its heart, a family that has dropped away, a visitation that has been neglected — the servant does not shrug and say, “That is the coordinator’s problem.” The servant prays, and weeps, and then acts, within the structures the Church has set, to see it mended. Responsibility does not wait to be asked; it goes looking.

It Takes Ownership

Alongside initiative stands an ugly cousin of it: the temptation, when things have gone wrong, to blame anyone other than ourselves. Responsibility closes that door. It owns what belongs to it, apologizes where apology is due, repents where repentance is due, and gets on with the work.

No parable shows this more tenderly than the one the Church calls the Prodigal. A young son takes his inheritance, spends it, hits the bottom of a foreign field feeding pigs, and finally — in the famous verse — comes to himself:

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’” (Luke 15:17–19, NKJV)

Notice what the son does not say. He does not say, the friends I fell in with ruined me. He does not say, the famine in this country made me desperate. He does not say, my father should have warned me. He says, I have sinned. I am no longer worthy. I will arise. That is the whole of responsibility compressed into three verbs: I have; I am; I will. The servant who can say those three sentences with honesty about his own life is almost already home.

St. Augustine, preaching on this parable again and again, refused to let his hearers miss the miracle buried in the middle of it:

“He came to himself. In his distant country he had been outside himself; in his repentance he came home to himself before he came home to his father.” – St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 112A (on Luke 15)

The lesson for the servant is piercing. We will make mistakes in the service. We will misjudge a child, we will prepare badly one week, we will speak too sharply in a meeting, we will drop the ball on a visit we promised to make. The question is not whether this will happen; the question is what we do when it does. The servant without ownership will find a reason. The servant with ownership will come to himself, and arise, and go back to the Father, and also — this matters — to the brother who was wronged, and will begin again. St. James promises us that when this movement is honest, the Lord meets it: “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16, NKJV).

It Reaches Beyond the Task

Responsibility in service has a way of quietly expanding if the servant lets it. A lesson to prepare becomes a life to know. A class to teach becomes a family to pray for. A task becomes a person. Our Lord Himself is the supreme teacher of this expansion, and one scene in particular shows it to us.

The crowds had followed Him into a wilderness place. The hour grew late. The disciples — reasonably, one might say — suggested He send them away so they could go and buy food in the villages. But our Lord looked at the crowd and saw more than a congregation:

“And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things... Then He said to them, “You give them something to eat.”” (Mark 6:34, 37, NKJV)

Notice the movement. He taught them, because they were hungry for the Word. But He also fed them, because they were hungry for bread. And on other days He healed them, because they were sick, and

forgave them, because they were burdened with guilt, and touched them, because they were lonely. The Master of every servant did not limit His responsibility to a single dimension of the people He had come to save. He took the whole person seriously. St. Gregory the Great, writing for every future pastor, made this the heart of the matter:

“He who has undertaken the care of souls must not think that by one kind of care he can discharge his whole office. The shepherd owes bread to the hungry, correction to the erring, encouragement to the faint-hearted, and a listening ear to the grieving — and to know which is owed to whom is itself a great part of the work.” – St. Gregory the Great, The Pastoral Rule, Book III, Prologue (paraphrased)

For us this means that our service is not discharged the moment the Sunday class ends. It is discharged slowly, across visits and phone calls and remembered birthdays and quiet follow-ups when a child is suddenly absent. Twenty years from now, the children we teach today will not remember the outline of most of our lessons. They will remember whether we knew their names. They will remember whether we called when a grandparent died. They will remember whether we noticed, on a bad Wednesday, that something was wrong and sat down with them for ten minutes. The content of the lesson is important. The relationship carries the lesson. Let us not serve one without serving the other.

This also means that when we encounter things we cannot fix — a home in crisis, a marriage in trouble, a child in danger — responsibility does not require us to do what is not ours to do. It requires us to pray, and to bring the concern faithfully to Abouna or to the proper coordinator, so that the shepherds of the flock can do what the Lord has appointed them to do. Responsibility is not the arrogance of thinking everything is ours to solve; responsibility is the humility of refusing to pretend that anything the Lord has put in front of us is someone else’s problem.

It Does Not Bow to Feelings or Circumstances

Finally, responsibility outlasts moods. If our service were governed by how we happened to feel on Saturday night, none of us would teach very long. A parent does not wake up on Tuesday and decide not to be a parent that day because the mood is not right. A priest does not cancel the liturgy because he is tired. In the same way, a servant who has accepted the call to feed the Lord’s lambs does not arrive or not arrive based on the weather of his heart. The work is too important, and the Lord to whom it is rendered is too faithful, for that kind of flickering.

St. Paul gave his young disciple St. Timothy the clearest possible charge on this:

“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” (2 Timothy 4:2, NKJV)

In season, when everything is going well. Out of season, when the class is small and the preparation felt dry and the week has been hard. Longsuffering — a word that means, literally, long-tempered, slow to give up on people or on the work itself. The Lord did not promise us that the service would always feel rewarding; He promised us that the service would always matter.

And lest we treat this lightly, He Himself drew the line between the two kinds of servants, in a parable we should never forget:

“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 25:21, NKJV)

The adjective is not successful. It is not talented. It is not popular. It is faithful. Faithfulness is what responsibility looks like when it has lasted. And the reward the Lord has in mind is not a badge or a thank-you; it is entry into His own joy. The servant who has learned to show up in season and out of season, who has taken ownership of mistakes, who has not waited for invitations, who has reached past the task to the person, who is daily renewing the choice Adam’s first word made and David’s later life unmade — that servant is being trained, over decades of small faithful acts, to hear those words. May the Lord who called us keep us faithful to the end, and may we find, when we arrive, that the children we served so imperfectly have arrived with us, and that the joy of the Lord is large enough for us all.

Review Questions

1. Genesis 2:23 and Genesis 3:12 show us the same Adam speaking twice — once as a covenant partner and once as a blame-shifter. In our own service this month, where have we sounded more like the second Adam than the first, and what would it look like to return, before the Lord, to the first posture?
2. The younger David risked his life for a single lamb; the older David, at a distance from God, consumed another man’s wife and life. The difference was not talent but nearness to God. Reading that honestly, how is the strength of our responsibility in the service connected to the depth of our prayer life? Which comes first for us, and which may need to?
3. The Samaritan saw and went. Nehemiah heard and wept and fasted and prayed and then moved. What is one need in our service right now that we have noticed but have been waiting for someone else to address? What would it look like to begin, this week, to take responsibility for it (within the structures of the Church and in communication with Abouna where appropriate)?
4. The Prodigal’s return begins with three short sentences — “I have sinned. I am no longer worthy. I will arise” (Luke 15:18–19). Is there a specific failure in our service for which we have not yet said those three sentences — either to the Lord, or to a person we wronged? What would it take, this season, to speak them?
5. Twenty years from now, the children we teach will not remember the outline of most of our lessons, but they will remember whether we knew their names, whether we called, whether we visited. Of the children the Lord has put before us, whose name have we been calling only in the classroom, and whose life has the Lord been quietly inviting us to enter more fully?

Books & References

Scripture: Genesis 2:18–25; Genesis 3:8–13; 1 Samuel 17:34–37; 2 Samuel 11–12; Nehemiah 1–2; Luke 10:25–37; Luke 15:11–24; Mark 6:30–44; Matthew 25:14–30; 2 Timothy 4:1–5; James 5:13–16 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, especially Homily XIV (on watchfulness and prayer).
- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, homily on the Good Samaritan.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermons on Luke 15 (especially on the Prodigal Son).
- St. Gregory the Great, The Pastoral Rule, Book III, on the diversity of hearers and the shepherd's varied care.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, on the merciful heart.
- Life of St. Pope Kyrillos VI, on the responsibility of the shepherd for the flock.
- Feed My Sheep (parish edition), chapter on the faithfulness of the servant.

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

Lesson Notes

CHAPTER

1.1 PERSONAL STRUGGLE OF THE SERVANT

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)

Yourselves 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

CHAPTER

1.2 SOURCES OF STRENGTH

The Fear of God

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Of all the things Scripture asks of us, perhaps none is more misunderstood than the fear of God. The phrase comes to our modern ears with a cold edge, as though the Lord expected us to approach Him trembling, looking over our shoulder, half expecting to be struck down. This is not at all what the Bible means, and it is not at all what the saints have taught us. The fear of God, in the Christian tradition, is the warmest and most grown-up posture a soul can take before its Creator. It is the reverence of a child who has come to understand, truly, how beloved he is — and who has also come to understand, truly, Whom he is speaking to when he speaks to God. It is a fear that makes us tender, not rigid. It is the beginning of wisdom, as Scripture says more than once, and it is the fountain out of which every other virtue of the servant's life quietly flows. In this lesson we will sit with the Lord's own words about holy fear, listen to the Fathers who discovered its sweetness, and find that what we feared about the fear of God was simply what the enemy wanted us to fear. The reality is gentler, richer, and more life-giving than any of us expected.

A Fear That Is Not Dread

Before we can learn what the fear of God is, we must quickly set aside what it is not. It is not the fear of a child before a harsh father. It is not the fear of a servant before a capricious master. It is not the fear of an accused man before a judge from whom he expects no mercy. Our tender God has been clearer with us about His heart than perhaps about any other subject. He does not want His children to come to Him afraid of Him.

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” (2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV)

And yet, in the same Scriptures, we are told over and over that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, the fountain of life, the secret of the Lord's friendship. The two things are not a contradiction. They are a gentle invitation into a distinction the Fathers loved — the distinction between slavish fear, which the Lord never asks of us, and filial fear, which He lovingly forms in us.

Slavish fear flees from God. Filial fear flees toward Him. Slavish fear asks, What will happen to me if I displease Him? Filial fear asks, How could I ever willingly grieve the heart of the One who loves me this much? The first is the posture of someone who has not yet understood the Gospel. The second is the posture of someone who has finally understood the Gospel all the way down.

St. John Chrysostom draws the line with his usual warmth:

“There is a fear that drives away, and there is a fear that draws near. The first belongs to the slave; the second belongs to the son. The one keeps us at a distance; the other

will not let us rest until we are in His arms.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XV

The fear of God, in its Christian meaning, is the fear that will not let us rest until we are in His arms. That is where we want to start.

The Beginning of Wisdom

Scripture is beautifully consistent about where wisdom starts. It does not start in our cleverness. It does not start in our education. It does not start in the effort of our own mind. It starts in a single, humbling posture, and every book of the Old Testament wisdom tradition repeats the same sentence almost verbatim:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Proverbs 1:7, NKJV)

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” (Proverbs 9:10, NKJV)

The repetition is deliberate. The Holy Spirit is not being redundant; He is being patient with us. Every serious knowing of God begins in the same place — in the quiet, reverent, awakened awareness that the One we are trying to know is incomparably greater than we are, and that we are standing on holy ground whenever we open the Scriptures, whenever we approach the Cup, whenever we speak His name at all.

And the fruit of that reverence is not constriction. It is the opposite. It is life:

“The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death.” (Proverbs 14:27, NKJV)

A fountain. The image is tender and generative. A soul who has learned holy fear is not a soul who has shrunk; he is a soul who has been put in contact with the source of everything living. He has become permeable to God. He has stopped trying to impress the Almighty and has begun, at last, to be formed by Him.

St. Basil the Great, preaching to a congregation who had perhaps heard too many sermons confusing fear with dread, spoke of the two faces of holy fear with characteristic clarity:

“The fear of God has two effects. It keeps us from the evil we would have done without it, and it pushes us gently forward into the good we would have neglected. It is both the wall around the garden and the rain that waters it.” — St. Basil the Great, Homily on Psalm 33

Wall and rain. Protection and nourishment. The servant who has learned to live inside that fear is a servant who is safe and alive at the same time.

Three Postures Before the Same God

The Fathers of the desert noticed that souls tend to approach God from one of three postures over the course of a lifetime, and each posture carries its own kind of fear. The three are not competing; they are stages of growth. None of us is asked to skip them, and every one of us, with patience, can pass through them.

The first posture is the slave. The slave avoids sin because he is afraid of punishment. This is not a noble motivation, but it is a real one, and the Lord, in His kindness, does not despise it. Many of us first came back to confession because we were frightened. Many of us first stopped a sin because we were frightened. The Lord took our slave-fear and honored it. He did not shame us for starting there.

The second posture is the hireling. The hireling avoids sin because he is hoping for reward. Again, not a noble posture, but a real one, and the Lord again works with it. Many of us have prayed more faithfully because we hoped for a clear season, or gave more generously because we hoped for blessing. These are small, honest motives, and the Lord used them to move us forward.

The third posture, and the one holy fear finally produces in us, is the son. The son avoids sin because he cannot bear to grieve the Father who loves him. His fear is no longer about himself at all. It is about the Person whom he has come to know. This is the only fear that lasts, and it is the fear Scripture calls the beginning of wisdom.

St. Dorotheos of Gaza, whose fourth discourse on the fear of God has shaped every monastic generation since, draws the image precisely:

“At the beginning a man serves God from fear of hell; this is the fear of a slave. Afterward, he serves Him for the sake of reward; this is the fear of a hireling. But in the end, he serves Him out of love for the good itself; this is the fear of a son. And this is the fear the Lord calls blessed.” — St. Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourse IV, On the Fear of God

We should not be embarrassed about the posture we are currently in. Most of us are still somewhere between the hireling and the son, on a given Tuesday afternoon. The point is not to pretend we are already a son. The point is to keep walking toward the Father, and to let Him, in His patience, draw us up through each posture until at last the fear that remains is nothing but the tender, wordless reverence of a child in the presence of a beloved Parent.

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

Some of us have read the Scriptures and noticed, with a small puzzle in the heart, that while the Old Testament seems to exalt the fear of God, the beloved disciple in the New Testament seems almost to contradict it:

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18, NKJV)

The Fathers, who knew this verse as well as they knew the Proverbs, were never troubled by the supposed tension. St. John is simply drawing the final end of the road the Proverbs pointed toward. The fear that involves torment — the slavish fear, the dread, the anxious avoidance of a God felt as threat — that fear is swallowed up in love. It has to be. No one who has understood how loved he is by the Father can go on fearing Him in the slavish sense. It becomes impossible.

But filial fear — the reverence of the son, the tender awe of the child who stands in wonder before the goodness of his Father — that fear is not cast out by love. That fear is love's most mature expression. The one who loves most is the one who reveres most. The seraphim, who are closer to the Throne than any creature, are the ones who cover their faces and cry Holy without ceasing. Their awe is not the opposite of their love. It is the shape their love has taken now that they have seen the One they love.

St. Gregory of Nyssa puts the whole thing in a single sentence worth carrying:

“The fear that is cast out is the fear of the stranger. The fear that remains is the wonder of the friend. Love does not empty the soul of reverence; it fills the soul with the only reverence worth keeping.” — St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Beatitudes, VII

The more we come to love God, the more we revere Him. And the more we revere Him, the more tender our love becomes. The two do not cancel each other. They grow together, the way breath and song grow together in a human voice.

The Servant's Daily Safeguard

There is a practical pastoral reason the Church has always tended so carefully to the fear of God in the lives of her servants. The work of ministry places us repeatedly in situations where small compromises are possible and nobody would notice. A quiet exaggeration in a testimony, a shaded truth in a report to a committee, a personal preference dressed up as a theological conviction, a subtle unkindness in speaking of a fellow servant behind his back — none of these things will ever be reported in the parish bulletin. But all of them, untended, slowly hollow out a servant. The fear of God is the invisible guardrail that keeps them from happening.

“Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences.” (2 Corinthians 5:11, NKJV)

St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians about his own integrity as a minister of the Gospel, tucks the fear of God quietly into the middle of the sentence. He is not trying to manipulate them with it. He is simply confessing that he lives under the awareness of a God who sees all things, and that this awareness is the very reason his service has been, over long years, undimmed by the ordinary compromises he could have made. The fear of the Lord kept him honest where no one else would have known.

Later in the same letter, he gives the Corinthians a pastoral summary they could have hung in every Sunday school classroom:

“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1, NKJV)

Holiness is perfected in the fear of God. Not by grit, not by willpower, not by clever technique, not by checklists — by the living, reverent, grateful awareness that the One who watches us loves us, and that we have no wish to grieve Him. That awareness, kept alive by prayer and by the sacraments, is enough to keep a servant straight through seasons in which he would not otherwise remain standing.

St. Isaac the Syrian, writing out of his long experience of both falling and being raised, left a sentence that any servant can paste inside the cover of his prayer book:

“The fear of God is the servant's invisible companion. When it is with him, he cannot lose his way. When he has silenced it, every path looks equally reasonable, and that is precisely when he is in the greatest danger.” — St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, LXVII

The invisible companion. He does not shout. He does not nag. He simply walks beside us, and his presence steadies our gait.

A Day Lived in the Light of That Fear

What does it actually look like, in the ordinary life of a servant, to walk in the fear of God? Not dramatic things. Not spectacular things. The fear of God, once received, expresses itself in the smallest corners of the day, and that is where the Holy Spirit prefers to do His deepest work.

It looks like slowing down before the icon in the morning because we remember Whose face we are standing before. It looks like a quiet pause before we answer an impatient message, because we know the Lord is listening to the words that come out of us. It looks like choosing the harder word with a beloved brother because we fear to speak a convenient lie to him more than we fear his reaction. It looks like a reverent silence in the presence of the Mysteries. It looks like our treatment of the poor, because we have remembered what the Lord said about the least of these. It looks like the prayer we say at the end of a day when we have not been at our best — a prayer offered not in terror but in the tenderness of a child who has come home.

The Lord's own mother gave us the purest picture of a life lived in holy fear in the Magnificat. She does not cringe. She does not grovel. She magnifies:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant... For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.” (Luke 1:46–50, NKJV)

His mercy is on those who fear Him. The two belong together. The more we receive His mercy, the more we fear Him; the more we fear Him, the more we receive His mercy. The Mother of God stands at the center of that beautiful circle, and she invites us to stand there with her.

May the Lord who is both Father and King teach us to revere Him as the Mother of God revered Him — with a love that bows, and a bowing that loves. May He form in us the fear that is the beginning of wisdom and the fountain of life, and may He let that fear be the quiet companion of every hour of our service. And may He, in His mercy, lead us from the fear of the slave, through the fear of the hireling, into the fear of the son — until at last the only thing we fear, anywhere in this world, is to grieve the heart of the One who has loved us with an everlasting love.

Review Questions

1. The Christian tradition distinguishes between slavish fear and filial fear. Where do we each recognize ourselves most — in the fear of the slave, the fear of the hireling, or the fear of the son — in this present season of our service? What would it look like to be drawn one step further into filial fear this year?
2. Scripture calls the fear of the Lord 'the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10) and 'a fountain of life' (Proverbs 14:27). How does this reframing change the way we speak about the fear of God to those we serve — especially to children and young believers who may have inherited a caricature of it?
3. St. John writes, 'perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4:18). How does the Fathers' distinction between the fear cast out and the fear that remains help us hold 1 John 4:18 together with Proverbs 9:10 without tension?
4. St. Paul says that holiness is 'perfected in the fear of God' (2 Corinthians 7:1). What are the small, invisible compromises of our own ministry that the fear of God would quietly prevent, and where do we sense the Lord asking us to raise the guardrail this month?
5. The Theotokos in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–50) gives us the clearest portrait of a life lived in holy fear. Which feature of her Magnificat — its lowliness, its magnification, its confidence in mercy — most corrects our own picture of the fear of God, and how can we bring that correction into tomorrow's prayer?

Books & References

Scripture: Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 9:10; Proverbs 14:27; Ecclesiastes 12:13; 2 Timothy 1:7; 2 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 John 4:18; Luke 1:46–50; Psalm 34:11; Hebrews 12:28 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, especially Homily XV (on slavish vs. filial fear).
- St. Basil the Great, Homily on Psalm 33 (the two effects of holy fear).
- St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Beatitudes, VII (reverence as the shape of love).
- St. Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourses, IV (On the Fear of God).

- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies (the fear of God as the servant's companion).
- St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent (on the ascent through fear to love).

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

Lesson Notes

Being Filled with the Holy Spirit

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Our Lord did not send His disciples into the world with only a teaching. He sent them with a Person. The Holy Spirit, poured out upon the Church at Pentecost, is not one more gift among many; He is the Gift that makes every other gift come alive. Without Him, the Scriptures remain ink on a page; with Him, they become living water. Without Him, the Eucharist remains bread and wine; with Him, it becomes the Body and Blood of Christ. Without Him, our service is kindly human effort; with Him, it becomes a vessel for the very life of God reaching souls who could not be reached any other way. Every servant who is going to last must learn, gently and deliberately, to be filled with the Spirit — not as a one-time event but as the steady breathing of the Christian life. In this lesson we will sit with the promise our Lord gave us before He ascended, we will watch the first disciples receive what He promised, and we will learn from Scripture and the Fathers how the servant today still stands in the same upper room, lifts the same prayer, and is filled with the same Spirit who has never stopped being given.

The Gift Our Lord Refused to Leave Us Without

On the night before His passion, our Lord spoke to His disciples about a parting He Himself found difficult. He did not hide His tenderness from them. He knew they were not ready to be left alone, and He had no intention of leaving them alone. He comforted them with a promise that has steadied the whole Church ever since:

“I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.” (John 14:18, NKJV)

He was not speaking only about the forty days of resurrection appearances. He was pointing forward to the day when, bodily ascended to the Father, He would send the Holy Spirit to dwell within His disciples for the rest of time. Just a few verses earlier He had named the Gift by name:

“And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever — the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16–17, NKJV)

Every word is tender. Another Helper, like Christ Himself in His helping. Forever, not for a season. The Spirit of truth, who will keep His disciples from drifting into their own imaginings. Dwells with you and will be in you — a move of nearness from outside to inside, from companion beside them to life within them. This was the plan all along. Our Lord did not die merely to deliver us from sin; He died, rose, and ascended so that His own Spirit could live inside His people and form them, from the inside out, into the likeness of the Son.

St. Athanasius, defending this very doctrine against those who wished to reduce the Spirit to something less, wrote with the plainness of a man who had touched the truth personally:

“The Son was sent so that we might receive the Spirit, and the Spirit is given so that we may live the life of the Son. What the Son has accomplished for us outside of us, the Spirit accomplishes in us within. They do not compete, for what the One has wrought in flesh the Other writes upon the heart.” — St. Athanasius, Letters to Serapion, I

Outside of us, and in us. This is the whole economy of the Gospel in miniature. The servant who misses the second half has only half the Gospel. The Lord did not want us to stop at Calvary; He wanted us to come all the way to Pentecost, where the fruit of Calvary is placed into the very marrow of our souls.

The First Filling and Its Pattern

Fifty days after Pascha, what our Lord had promised was given. The scene is one the Church has celebrated every year since, and every year we do well to sit with it again:

“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”
(Acts 2:1–4, NKJV)

The details are not decorative. Each one tells us something about how the Spirit fills us still. They were all with one accord. The first filling came to a praying community, not to a solitary genius. The Spirit loves unity, and He rests most readily on disciples who have set aside their disagreements and come to the same room. They were all in one place. The Spirit came to those who had gathered where He had been expected to come; they were not scattered elsewhere doing their own business. The sound came from heaven. The initiative was God's, not theirs; they could not have manufactured what they received. The tongues rested on each of them. The Spirit is given personally, not as a general atmosphere over the Church, but as a flame resting on the head of each individual member of her.

And the result was that they were filled. Not emptied. Not erased. Not overridden. Filled. Each disciple remained himself — Peter, impetuous and honest; John, beloved and quiet; Matthew, careful and watchful — and yet each was now the vessel of a life infinitely greater than his own personality. This is always what the Spirit does when He fills a soul. He does not replace us. He makes us more fully who we were meant to be in the first place.

St. Cyril of Alexandria, preaching on this text to a congregation in Egypt that knew in its bones the difference between a dead religion and a living one, said it with characteristic precision:

“The Spirit does not erase what He enters; He makes it shine. The flame that rested on St. Peter did not abolish Peter — it set Peter on fire. So also in us: every gift we possess, every temperament, every weakness, is offered to the Spirit not for destruction but for

transfiguration.” — St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, on John 14

The whole servant, handed to the Spirit, becomes the whole servant on fire. Nothing of us is wasted; everything of us is set alight.

Be Filled — A Continuous Invitation

Pentecost was a once-in-history event in its dramatic form, but the filling of the Spirit is not a once-in-history event in the life of a Christian. The New Testament writers speak of this filling in the present tense, as an ongoing reality that every disciple is called into again and again. St. Paul commands it directly:

“And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” (Ephesians 5:18–19, NKJV)

The Greek verb is in the present continuous — keep on being filled. St. Paul is not addressing this to people who have never received the Spirit; he is writing to baptized Christians. The filling he calls them to is not a second initiation; it is the ordinary posture of a disciple who knows the Spirit indwells him and who keeps opening the door wider for Him day after day.

The Book of Acts reinforces this pattern. The same disciples who were filled at Pentecost in chapter two are filled again in chapter four, when they have finished a season of prayer after persecution:

“And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:31, NKJV)

The same apostles, filled again. This is not a theological contradiction; it is a pastoral gift. The filling of the Spirit is meant to be re-applied. A servant who was filled at his chrismation as an infant is meant to be filled again at his ordination, and again at every sunrise, and again before every difficult conversation, and again on every day when he feels that he has nothing left of his own to give. The Spirit does not grow tired of being poured out. We grow tired only because we forget to ask.

St. Seraphim of Sarov, whose own face once shone with the uncreated light before his disciple Motovilov, told his visitor plainly what the whole goal of the Christian life is:

“The true aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. Fasting and prayer and almsgiving are good things, but they are only means. The end is the Spirit Himself. Acquire Him, my friend; acquire the Spirit of peace, and a thousand around you will find their salvation.” — St. Seraphim of Sarov, Conversation with Motovilov

Acquire Him. The verb is startling at first — we do not usually think of acquiring a Person — but St. Seraphim has chosen it deliberately. A gift received yesterday becomes, by our daily yes, a life lived

today. The Spirit is given at baptism and chrismation as a seed. The work of a lifetime is to let that seed fill every corner of the garden.

The Fruit By Which We Recognize Him

How do we know when the Holy Spirit is filling us? Not primarily by dramatic phenomena. Not primarily by emotional intensity. Not primarily by whether a season in our service feels fruitful to us or not. The New Testament tells us with disarming simplicity how to recognize the Spirit's work in a soul. We look for the fruit:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22–23, NKJV)

Nine fruits, growing on a single tree. Notice how domestic they are. They are not the spectacular gifts that would draw a crowd. They are the qualities our family members would notice if we lived with them for a year. They are the qualities our spouse, our children, the parishioners who carpool with us, the coworkers who share our office would see whether we were preaching or not. The Spirit, when He is filling a soul, does not make that soul louder or more impressive. He makes it more like Christ — and Christ, more than any other figure in history, is known by love, joy, peace, and the other seven quiet glories on that list.

St. Paul's list is also, tenderly, a diagnostic. If we want to know where the Spirit has been given the most room in our lives, we look to the place where these fruits are most visibly growing. And if we want to know where we are still resisting Him, we look to the places where these fruits are still visibly sparse. A week of honest examination along these nine lines will tell a servant more about the state of his soul than a week of abstract theological reflection.

St. Macarius the Great spoke of this connection between the Spirit's indwelling and the ripening of the soul with all the candor of the desert:

“The Spirit does not descend upon a soul all at once, as if to replace it; He descends gradually, as light enters a room. He lights up first one corner, then another, until at last nothing of the room remains in shadow. Our work is simply to keep opening the windows.” — St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies, VIII

Keep opening the windows. That is the whole spiritual discipline of a Spirit-filled servant, told in five words.

The Spirit in the Servant's Work

The filling of the Spirit is not only for our private sanctification. It is also the engine of our service. St. Paul tells Timothy that the gift of ministry itself is a gift of the Spirit, to be stirred up when the fire seems low:

“Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” (2 Timothy 1:6–7, NKJV)

Stir up. The image is of a banked coal on the hearth, waiting for a breath of air. The coal is not gone; it is there, sometimes beneath a surprising amount of ash. A servant who feels his own ministry has grown cold is not being told to start again from nothing. He is being told to stir. A fresh hour of prayer before the icon, an honest confession, a deliberate returning to the Scriptures he had drifted away from, the laying on of hands by a bishop or a father of confession in a moment of renewal — any of these is the breath the banked coal is waiting for.

When the Spirit moves in our service, we are able to do things we cannot do on our own power. We find patience where we had no patience. We speak words we had not prepared. We love people our natural temperament could not love. We persevere through seasons we would have walked out of years ago. This is not our own strength suddenly discovered. This is the Spirit, living in us, doing through us what we could never have done without Him. The servant who has learned to recognize this grace learns, after a while, not to take credit for it.

The whole Church in the Book of Acts is a running case study in Spirit-led service. She moves when the Spirit moves. She waits when the Spirit waits. She speaks when the Spirit speaks. She is silent when the Spirit is silent. Her great single summary statement is one every modern servant should memorize:

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us.” (Acts 15:28, NKJV)

To the Holy Spirit, and then to us. The order matters. He leads; we follow. The moment we reverse that order, our service begins to strain under its own weight, and the fruit begins to thin. When we restore the order, the work breathes again.

A Prayer for the Daily Filling

Because the filling of the Spirit is not a one-time event, it is also not a one-time prayer. The servant grows, over time, into the habit of asking to be filled afresh each day. There are many such prayers; we need not complicate it. The Lord's own prayer for the Spirit, addressed to the Father on our behalf, is perhaps the most tender:

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:13, NKJV)

How much more. Our tender God is not reluctant about this gift. He is not carefully rationing the Spirit, waiting for us to earn Him. He is eager to give, and He gives to those who simply ask. The short prayer "Lord, fill me today with Your Holy Spirit" — prayed in the shower, in the car, at the kitchen sink, before the lesson we are about to teach — is a prayer the Lord delights to answer. It is one of the most generous trades in the spiritual life. A thirty-second prayer answered by a day-long indwelling.

The Church herself has given us, in her own liturgical life, the great prayer for the Spirit's coming. Every Orthodox Christian knows it by heart, and every servant should pray it often and slowly:

“O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things; Treasury of Blessings, and Giver of Life — come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One.” — Prayer to the Holy Spirit (from the Divine Liturgy)

Come and abide. Cleanse. Save. The three verbs the Spirit waits to fulfill in us, on every morning we ask. May the Lord who has given us His own Spirit for a Helper and a Comforter keep filling us as we keep opening. May the fruit of His indwelling — the love and joy and peace and all the rest — be visible in our homes and in our service this week. And may we, at the end of a long life of letting the windows stand open, find that the Spirit has filled every corner of us, until there is no shadow left where He is not dwelling and no part of us that is not a vessel for the life of our tender God.

Review Questions

1. Our Lord tells His disciples, 'I will not leave you orphans' (John 14:18, NKJV), and His answer to that parting is the sending of the Holy Spirit. How does this change the way we understand the Spirit — not as an addition to the Gospel but as the inside of it?
2. St. Paul commands, 'Be filled with the Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18, NKJV), in a continuous-tense verb. How have we understood 'being filled' in our own life — as a one-time event or as a daily posture — and what would it mean to shift toward the continuous understanding this week?
3. Galatians 5:22–23 gives us nine fruits by which we recognize the Spirit's work. Looking honestly at the last month, which fruit has grown most visibly in us, and which one has been most neglected? What one fruit would we ask the Spirit to ripen in us next?
4. St. Seraphim of Sarov says the aim of the Christian life is 'the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.' How does that framing reshape our understanding of spiritual disciplines — fasting, prayer, almsgiving — as means rather than as ends?
5. The Church in Acts 15:28 orders her decisions 'to the Holy Spirit, and to us.' In the area of service the Lord has given us right now, where might we have quietly reversed that order, and what would it look like to restore it this season?

Books & References

Scripture: John 14:16–18, 26; John 16:13; Acts 2:1–4; Acts 4:31; Acts 15:28; Ephesians 5:18–19; Galatians 5:22–23; 2 Timothy 1:6–7; Luke 11:13; Romans 8:14–16 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. Athanasius, Letters to Serapion (on the divinity and indwelling of the Spirit).

- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, on John 14.
- St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies, especially Homily VIII.
- St. Seraphim of Sarov, Conversation with Motovilov (on acquisition of the Holy Spirit).
- St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit.
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Words for Our Time (pastoral letters on the Spirit in the servant's work).

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

Lesson Notes

The Vitality of Confession

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Every servant, sooner or later, has had the quiet experience of wondering why the fire of ministry has grown dim even though nothing obvious has changed. The prayer rule is still kept. The Liturgy is still attended. The service is still offered. And yet, something underneath has cooled. Almost always, the answer is not some new spiritual discipline the servant has not yet discovered. The answer is a familiar Mystery that has been gently set aside: the Sacrament of Confession. In our tradition it is called the Second Baptism, because it returns to the soul the same grace the first baptism once gave. Confession is not a duty the Church has burdened us with; it is one of the kindest gifts our tender God has placed into the life of every Christian, and the servant who keeps it alive keeps himself alive for a long ministry. In this lesson we will sit with the Lord's own institution of this Mystery, listen to the Fathers who discovered its healing power, and see why the vitality of the servant's inner life so often rises and falls with the vitality of his confession.

A Gift Christ Placed into the Hands of His Church

Confession is not a later invention of the Church. It is a Mystery our Lord instituted with His own lips on the evening of His resurrection. Scripture records the scene with a stillness that matches the stillness of the upper room that night:

"So Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" (John 20:21–23, NKJV)

Read every phrase. Peace to you — the first gift of the risen Lord to His Church is peace. As the Father has sent Me, I also send you — the apostolic mission begins in the same breath as the gift of forgiveness. He breathed on them — the word is the same word used in Genesis for the breath of life breathed into Adam. This is a new creation. Receive the Holy Spirit — the authority about to be given is not human; it flows directly from the Holy Spirit who rests upon the ordained hand. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them — this is not a future promise; it is a present authority handed, on Easter evening, to the men who would stand in the Church as shepherds after Him.

Those same men handed the authority on to their successors, and those successors to theirs, in an unbroken line of laying-on of hands that reaches down to the bishop and priest who hears our confession tonight. When we kneel before the priest, we are kneeling before a descendant of the breath of Christ. The hand that pronounces absolution is, in a mysterious but real sense, the hand of

the Lord Himself, reaching into our souls across twenty centuries to speak the word He had already spoken on the night He rose.

St. John Chrysostom, writing on this very passage, said it with characteristic tenderness:

“Great is the dignity of the priesthood that the Lord has given His own authority to forgive to men made of dust. What the angels in heaven cannot do, He has entrusted to His ministers, so that the penitent soul might not despair of pardon but find, in the hands of a brother, the very mercy of Christ.” — St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood, III

The very mercy of Christ, in the hands of a brother. This is the Mystery. It is not a psychological debrief. It is the Lord Himself, extending pardon through the ordained hand He has anointed for the purpose.

The Second Baptism

The Fathers have called Confession the Second Baptism, and the name is tender and exact. At our first baptism, the Lord washed us clean and clothed us in the white garment of His righteousness. We left the font a new creation. But we all know what has happened since. The garment has been stained. Sometimes lightly, sometimes deeply. Sometimes by small carelessnesses, sometimes by decisions we have come to regret in the quiet of the night. The question has always been: what do we do with the garment we were given?

The ancient Church was not without answer. St. Paul, writing to Christians who were struggling with their own shortcomings, wrote plainly:

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9, NKJV)

If we confess. The condition is simple. The result is total — forgiveness and cleansing, not partial, not probationary, not on a sliding scale. And the reason is not our worthiness; it is God's character. He is faithful and just. Our confidence in confession rests not on how well we do it but on Who is receiving it.

The Council Fathers of the fourth century, when they spoke about the penitential life of the Church, used language that reminds us how seriously they took this renewal of baptismal grace:

“The tears of the penitent are the laver of the second baptism. What the water first accomplished, the tears now renew. Let no Christian despair of his fall, for the Lord has given us a second font, drawn from our own repentance and sealed by the priest's hand.” — St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 39

A second font. Every Confession is a return to the waters we first walked out of as infants. The white garment is washed. The seal is re-applied. The soul stands again in the dignity it was given at its first baptism, not because the stains never happened, but because the blood of Christ has passed over them one more time. This is the whole glory of the Mystery, and it should never grow old to us.

Why Confession Must Be Spoken

A question that rises honestly in many hearts is this: if God is everywhere and knows everything, why do we have to speak our sins out loud to a priest? Why is it not enough to confess privately, heart to heart, to the Lord who already knows all things?

The Church has not been shy about answering this question, and the answer is beautifully pastoral. God already knows, yes. He does not need our speech in order to be informed. But we need our speech, in order to be healed. The act of saying a sin out loud — specifically, concretely, to a human priest acting as Christ's representative — does something inside us that silent regret alone cannot do.

First, it defeats the shame that loves darkness. Sins that stay hidden grow comfortable. They begin to feel normal. They develop rationalizations. The moment we say them out loud, even once, the rationalizations die. Light destroys what only darkness could preserve.

“But everything exposed by the light is made manifest, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says: ‘Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’” (Ephesians 5:13–14, NKJV)

Second, spoken confession breaks the pride that would otherwise simply talk to itself. A soul that confesses only in its own head is still at the center of its own story. A soul that kneels before a priest and says the words out loud has, by the act of kneeling, admitted that it is not the final authority on its own condition. That admission, small as it seems, is itself a piece of healing.

Third, the spoken confession receives a spoken absolution. This is not a small thing. Our Lord could have set up His mercy to be communicated silently, by feelings alone, but He did not. He set it up to come through a voice we can hear with our ears. The words, ‘I, the unworthy priest, by the authority given to me, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,’ are words the enemy cannot easily erase from our memory. Months later, when shame whispers that we were never really forgiven, we can answer the whisper with a remembered sentence — actual words, in an actual voice, from an actual moment when Christ spoke through His ordained hand.

St. James, writing to the early Church about this practice, simply assumed it:

“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” (James 5:16, NKJV)

That you may be healed. James does not say, ‘that God may be informed.’ He knew God was informed. He says that our healing is what is at stake — and that healing comes through spoken confession and the intercessory prayer of a brother. That sentence alone would be enough to establish the practice if no other verse existed.

The Father of Confession

The ancient Church, in her wisdom, knew that Confession would work best when each Christian made it regularly to the same priest over a long period of time. She called such a priest the penitent's spiritual father, and the relationship between a soul and its father of confession remains, to this day, one of the most tender gifts the Church can give any Christian — and especially any servant.

What is a father of confession? He is not a therapist, though the conversation is often therapeutic. He is not a friend, though the relationship grows, over years, into a deep friendship. He is not a boss, though his counsel is to be heeded seriously. He is a father, in the spiritual sense — a man who, by his prayers and his counsel and his steady fidelity, is helping to raise a soul into the likeness of Christ. The servant who has such a father is a servant with a kind of safety net few other Christians possess.

The importance of this figure is not a recent development. It runs all the way back through the desert. Abba Moses, in the Sayings of the Fathers, gave this counsel to a young monk, and the counsel applies just as well to a young servant:

“Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything — but first, find a father, open your heart to him, and do nothing without his prayer. A ship without a pilot wanders; a Christian without a father, in time, wanders even more.” — Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Abba Moses 6

The counsel is not about dependency; it is about humility. A servant who answers to no one on earth about the state of his soul is a servant in great spiritual danger, not because he is worse than anyone else but because the ordinary graces of correction, encouragement, and pattern-recognition have been closed off from his life. A servant who answers regularly to a beloved father of confession, on the other hand, has access to a kind of wisdom and care that cannot be gotten any other way.

St. John Climacus, who spent his life forming monks at Sinai, said it with the weight of long experience:

“The man who has set his foot on the ladder of the divine ascent without a father to guide him will either fall quickly or climb slowly and unsurely. The man who climbs under obedience will reach heights his own strength could not have carried him to.” — St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 4

The Rhythm of a Living Confession

How often should a servant confess? The Church has not laid down an absolute rule, because different seasons and different temperaments need different cadences. But the general wisdom of our tradition, handed down through many generations of pastoral fathers, is this: a servant should confess often enough that no sin takes root in him, and at least often enough that the Church's great feasts find him cleansed.

For most servants, this means confession at least before each of the four great fasts — the Nativity Fast, the Great Fast (Lent), the Apostles' Fast, and the Fast of the Theotokos — and more frequently in

seasons of particular struggle. Many faithful servants find it helpful to confess monthly. In times of specific temptation or spiritual dryness, even more often is often the right answer.

What the servant wants to avoid, above all, is the slow drift by which months become a year, and a year becomes two, and the soul forgets what it felt like to stand up from the stole absolved. That drift is how the vitality of the inner life begins to fade without the servant being able to say why. The quiet of a clean conscience, the specific consolation of a recent absolution, the habit of honest self-examination that a regular confession trains — all of these are what keep a servant's flame from guttering over the long years of ministry.

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians a sentence that the Church has folded, ever since, into her understanding of regular confession:

“But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”
(1 Corinthians 11:28, NKJV)

Self-examination before the Eucharist is not meant to terrify us out of communicating; it is meant to prepare us for communicating worthily. The servant who has made a habit of bringing his self-examination all the way to the priest, rather than keeping it only in his own head, comes to the Chalice with a cleanness he would not otherwise possess. And that cleanness is not a burden he carries; it is the garment in which his Lord has insisted on dressing him.

St. Theophan the Recluse, writing to a layman who asked him directly about the frequency of confession in modern life, answered with his usual warmth:

“Confess often, and not formally. If you have truly sinned, confess it at the first opportunity and do not let it sit on the soul. If you have not, still come, for the prayer of the stole is a cleansing breath even where no great sin is named. This is not obsession; it is respiration. The soul that stops breathing, dies.” — St. Theophan the Recluse, Letters on the Spiritual Life

Respiration. That is the gentlest and truest image for the rhythm of a living confession. In and out, in and out, across the long years of a servant's life — each confession a cleansing breath, each absolution the oxygen that keeps the soul alive for the next stretch of the road.

Bringing the Mystery Home

Here, at the close of this lesson, is the quiet invitation every servant needs to hear again: the vitality of our ministry rises and falls with the vitality of our confession. When our confession is regular, honest, specific, and brought to a trusted father, the strength of our service is supplied by the very Lord whose pardon keeps our soul clean. When our confession has drifted, the strength of our service begins to be supplied by ourselves, and we are all, in the end, too small for that weight.

So let us return, if we have drifted. Let us not let shame keep us from the very Mystery that was instituted to deliver us from shame. The priest who will hear us is not shocked by anything. The Lord

who will forgive us is not hesitant. The absolution that awaits us has already been prepared, and it has our name on it. The only thing left is for us to come.

There is a tender scene at the end of the Gospel of John that the Church has always read as a picture of the restoration of a fallen servant. Three times Peter had denied the Lord before His passion; and three times, around a charcoal fire on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, our risen Lord asked him gently whether he loved Him. With each affirmation, the Lord restored Peter to the service he had forfeited — feed My lambs, tend My sheep, feed My sheep. The restoration was total. Peter walked away from that charcoal fire not merely forgiven but re-commissioned, and the Church has never forgotten it.

Every Confession is a little version of that charcoal fire. The Lord stands there, asking us quietly whether we love Him. We answer Him — sometimes tearfully, sometimes plainly, sometimes wordlessly. And He restores us, each time, not merely to forgiveness but to the service that the sin had tried to steal from us. The servant who stays close to Confession stays close to that fire, and the fire keeps him warm for the whole of the long ministry that lies ahead.

May our tender Lord keep the stole of His priest always within reach of our hearts. May He teach us to speak the sins we would rather hide, and to receive without flinching the forgiveness we have already been given. May the Second Baptism be, for each of us, a font we return to often, gratefully, and without fear — and may the clean conscience of an absolved servant be the quiet atmosphere in which the whole of our service is done, from this year until our last.

Review Questions

1. Our Lord institutes the Sacrament of Confession on the evening of His resurrection (John 20:21–23, NKJV). What does the setting of His resurrection tell us about the nature of this Mystery, and how does it reframe the way we approach the stole?
2. The Fathers call Confession a 'Second Baptism' (St. Gregory of Nazianzus). What does that name claim about the effects of Confession on the soul, and how does holding it in our heart guard us from the slow drift of staying away?
3. St. James writes, 'Confess your trespasses to one another... that you may be healed' (James 5:16, NKJV). Why does healing require the confession to be spoken and not only thought, and what has our own experience taught us about that difference?
4. The Church has taught, from the desert onward, the great value of a consistent father of confession. Do we have one, and how has his faithfulness formed us? If we do not yet, what is one step we could take this season to begin that relationship?
5. St. Theophan calls confession the soul's 'respiration.' What is the current rhythm of our own confession, and what change would make it truly respiratory — in and out, without strain, without long pauses — across the coming year?

Books & References

Scripture: John 20:21–23; 1 John 1:9; James 5:16; Ephesians 5:13–14; 1 Corinthians 11:28; John 21:15–17; Matthew 18:18; Psalm 32 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, especially Book III.
- St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 39* (on the baptisms and the laver of tears).
- St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 4 (on obedience to a spiritual father).
- *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, especially the sayings of Abba Moses and Abba Poemen on confession and obedience.
- St. Theophan the Recluse, *Letters on the Spiritual Life* (on the rhythm of confession).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, *The Communion of Love* (pastoral writings on the Mysteries).

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

Lesson Notes

CHAPTER

1.3 DISCIPLESHIP

Discipleship

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Our Lord's final commandment to His Church was not 'make members,' and it was not 'make attenders.' It was make disciples. That single word has shaped the entire Christian centuries since, and it should shape every servant's understanding of what he has been sent to do. A disciple is not a religious consumer; a disciple is a person being conformed, over a lifetime, to the image of Christ — and who is, in turn, helping to form others into that same image. This is the work the Lord has placed into our hands. It is not reserved for a few specialists; it is the ordinary calling of every baptized Christian, and especially of every servant. In this lesson we will sit with the Great Commission, trace the contours of what discipleship actually looks like in the Gospels, and learn from Scripture and the Fathers how the servant who has become a disciple makes disciples of others. We will find, tenderly, that the road has been walked before us by our Lord Himself, and that He is still the one doing the real forming — through our small, faithful, ordinary hands.

A Commandment, Not a Suggestion

There is a way of reading the Great Commission that turns it into a slogan for overseas missions and then quietly sets it on a shelf. Our Lord did not leave it on a shelf, and we must not either. The words He spoke to His apostles on the mountain in Galilee were His very last instructions to His Church before He ascended, and there is no accident in their form:

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’” (Matthew 28:18–20, NKJV)

Every clause bears weight. All authority has been given to Me. The Lord does not send us in our own authority; He sends us in His. Go therefore. The imperative follows from the authority; we do not go because we feel brave but because He has commissioned us. Make disciples. Not converts only, not hearers only — disciples. Of all the nations. No group is exempt; the commission reaches to our neighborhood and our own extended family as fully as to the ends of the earth. Baptizing them. The initiation into discipleship is sacramental, not merely intellectual. Teaching them to observe all things. The forming of a disciple is a long apprenticeship, not a short information transfer. And lo, I am with you always — the sentence we carry into every class we teach and every conversation we hold.

St. Cyril of Alexandria, commenting on this commissioning, drew out what our Lord had actually promised:

“He does not send them into the world bare of His help. He sends them with Himself. ‘I am with you,’ He says — as though He were saying, ‘Wherever you open your mouth to teach, there I also am; wherever you kneel to baptize, there also are My hands; wherever you instruct a soul in the way of life, there also is My heart.’” — St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew, on 28:20

This is the blessing the servant needs most. Our labor in discipleship is not a lonely one. The Lord Himself is with us in every conversation, every lesson, every prayer, every long car ride with a struggling disciple. He has not handed us this work and walked away; He has handed us this work so that He might walk with us through it.

What the Gospels Mean by 'Disciple'

Before we can make a disciple, we must know what one is. The word itself, in Greek, is *mathētēs* — a learner, an apprentice, one who walks behind a master and picks up the master's life by association. Our Lord did not invent the concept; there were many teachers in Israel with their own disciples. But He transformed the concept, because He was not asking for apprentices in a craft but for souls in the whole of their living.

The Gospels sketch, in a dozen different scenes, what a disciple actually does. A disciple leaves what he was doing and follows:

“As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ So he arose and followed Him.” (Matthew 9:9, NKJV)

A disciple sits at the Master's feet and listens before he speaks:

“And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word... ‘One thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.’” (Luke 10:39, 42, NKJV)

A disciple loves his brethren with the love he has received from the Master:

“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35, NKJV)

A disciple carries a cross:

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” (Matthew 16:24, NKJV)

A disciple remains in the Word over time:

“If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31–32, NKJV)

And at the end, a disciple bears fruit — the fruit of his own disciples, made in his master's likeness, not in his own:

“By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.”
(John 15:8, NKJV)

Six small sketches, and together they form a living portrait. The disciple has followed, has listened, has loved, has carried a cross, has abided in the Word, and is now bearing fruit. No one moment along that trajectory is the whole of discipleship. Discipleship is the whole trajectory, walked together with the Master and with those He sends us to.

St. Isaac the Syrian, writing out of a tradition that took these words as seriously as a handbook, summed it up in one gentle line:

“The disciple is not the one who has learned much from the master, but the one who has become like the master. Knowledge is the doorway; likeness is the whole house.”
— St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, XXIII

Knowledge is the doorway; likeness is the whole house. The servant who measures the success of his discipleship only by the number of Bible verses his disciples have memorized is a servant still living in the doorway. The whole house is down the hall.

The Master's Method

If we want to know how to make a disciple, we would do well to watch, closely, how the Master made His own. Our Lord did not publish a curriculum and hand it to the Twelve; He lived with them for three years, and their formation happened largely through the ordinary friction and grace of that shared life. The Gospels are, in a sense, case studies in discipleship method.

First, He called them by name. He did not put out a general invitation and hope the right souls showed up. He walked up to Simon and Andrew and said, 'Follow Me.' He walked up to James and John as they mended their nets. He called Matthew from his tax booth in the middle of a work day. Each disciple was called personally, by a Master who had already taken the trouble to know him. Every servant who makes disciples today does the same work: he knows the people entrusted to him not as a crowd but as a set of faces, names, stories, and seasons.

Second, He spent time with them. Not an hour a week, but the whole of the hours. They walked with Him on the road. They ate with Him. They went fishing with Him. They saw Him tired, hungry, misunderstood, praised, attacked. They saw Him pray. This is what formed them. The Lord did not cut any corners on the duration of the relationship, and neither can a servant. Discipleship cannot be microwaved. It happens on the long road, over many cups of tea, across the small and large seasons of life.

Third, He taught them as they were ready. He did not dump every truth into them at once. He spoke in parables to the crowd and then, privately, explained the parables to the Twelve. He withheld certain teachings until they could bear them (John 16:12). He let their own questions shape what He revealed

next. This is the holy patience that every discipler must learn. A disciple is not a bucket to be filled; he is a flower being grown, and he opens at the speed the Spirit sets for him, not at the speed of our schedule.

Fourth, He sent them out. After a season of watching Him, He began to send them out in pairs to do what He had been doing. He let them fail. He received them back. He corrected them tenderly. He sent them out again. This rhythm of send-and-receive is crucial. A disciple who is never given responsibility to do the work never becomes a disciple; he remains a spectator.

Fifth, He promised to remain with them after He was gone. The whole discipleship project was never about creating dependence on Him in His earthly form; it was about creating a confidence in Him that would survive His ascension and grow into the great sending of the Church.

St. Gregory the Great, whose Pastoral Rule is among the great discipleship handbooks of the ancient Church, named the Lord's method in a single sentence:

“Christ did not teach first and live afterward. He lived first and taught out of His living. The servant who would make disciples must take the same order seriously: let life precede lesson, let example precede exhortation, and the Holy Spirit will do in a year more than a decade of mere words could do.” — St. Gregory the Great, Pastoral Rule, II.3

Life before lesson. Example before exhortation. This is the order our Lord kept, and it is the order every disciple-making servant must keep if his work is to bear the kind of fruit that lasts.

The Chain Across the Generations

Discipleship is not an island. Every disciple is a link in a chain that reaches back to the apostles and forward into a future none of us will see. The beauty of this chain is that each link is ordinary; no one has to be extraordinary for the chain to hold. It holds because the Lord holds it.

St. Paul draws the chain with unforgettable precision in his last letter to Timothy:

“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2, NKJV)

Count the generations in that single verse. Paul — Timothy — the faithful men — the others also. Four generations, in one sentence. This is not the Apostle doing long-range strategic planning; this is the Apostle simply describing how the Gospel spreads. It spreads through relationships, across generations, by the deliberate choice of each disciple to invest in someone who will in turn invest in someone else.

The servant who thinks of himself merely as a teacher of his current class has missed the deeper calling. His current class is not the end product; it is a set of future disciplers. The young man in the youth group who is quietly watching how the servant prays is, in some real sense, already a

fourth-generation disciple of St. Paul — and will, if God wills, pass the chain to a fifth generation the servant himself will not live to meet.

This is why our Lord cared so intensely about the Twelve. He was not merely training twelve good men; He was planting the seed of the entire future Church. Everything we enjoy in the Orthodox Christian life today — every Father we read, every hymn we sing, every priest who hears our confession — reaches us through that original apostolic planting and the many, many humble disciple-makers who have kept the chain unbroken since.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing in the second century to defend the apostolic succession against heretics, wrote one of the gentlest and most confident sentences in all of patristic literature:

“The Church, though scattered throughout the whole world, guards the one faith she has received from the apostles, as if she occupied but one house. She believes these points just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart. For the languages of the world are various, but the power of the tradition is one and the same.” — St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, I.10.2

One house, one soul, one heart, across all the centuries and all the continents. That is what the chain of discipleship has produced. And every servant today, by the faithful forming of even one disciple, is contributing to that one house.

The Cost and the Promise

Our Lord never hid the cost of discipleship. He spoke of it plainly, with a tenderness that warns but does not frighten. He wanted every soul who followed Him to count the cost beforehand so that the yes, once given, could stand through whatever came:

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” (Luke 14:26–27, NKJV)

The word hate is a Semitic idiom, not a call to family resentment. The Lord is saying plainly: nothing, not even our dearest human loves, may be placed above Him in the ordering of our heart. A disciple is one for whom Christ is first, and everything else dearer to us is held more tenderly precisely because Christ is first. This is not a reduction of our loves; it is the purification of them.

But He balanced the cost with a promise, and the promise is extravagant:

“Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time — houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions — and in the age to come, eternal life.” (Mark 10:29–30, NKJV)

A hundredfold now in this time. Not in the age to come only, but now. Every disciple who has walked far enough along the road knows what this promise means. He has discovered that the family of Christ is wider than his blood family ever was. He has discovered homes open to him in every place his feet have taken him. He has discovered a joy the world does not know and cannot take. The cost was real. The return is a hundredfold. The Lord does not exaggerate His promises.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this passage to a congregation that included many who had suffered for their faith, spoke the truth with the force of pastoral experience:

“No one has ever truly given anything to Christ and walked away poorer. Count the gift; count the return; then count again. The arithmetic of the Kingdom does not resemble the arithmetic of this world. In His hands, every offering multiplies.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, LXIV

Making Disciples This Week

How, practically, does a servant make disciples this week? The question sounds ambitious, but the answer is refreshingly ordinary. Disciple-making is a habit, not a campaign. It is built from small, repeated practices that compound over years into souls shaped for Christ.

First, it begins with our own discipleship. We cannot make in others what we have not allowed the Lord to make in us. The servant who has stopped reading the Scriptures for himself cannot make Bible-reading disciples. The servant who has grown cold in prayer cannot make praying disciples. The soul of discipleship is contagion; what we have becomes what our disciples catch. Let us tend our own fire first. The Lord is not going to shame us for doing so.

Second, it asks us to know our disciples by name. Most of us serve in contexts where the people entrusted to us are numerous: a youth group, a Sunday school class, a choir, a parish. We cannot disciple everyone equally. We can, however, know everyone a little and a few people deeply. The Lord gave Himself to the multitude but to the Twelve in a different way, and among the Twelve, to Peter and James and John in a different way still. This is not favoritism; it is capacity. A servant who invests deeply in a handful over years leaves a deeper legacy than a servant who invests shallowly in hundreds for a season.

Third, it asks us to be interruptible. So much of the Lord's own discipleship happened in unscheduled moments — a conversation by a well, a question from a blind man at the roadside, a child brought forward by a mother. A servant too busy for interruptions will make, over time, very few disciples. A servant who has learned to receive interruptions as assignments will find the Lord doing some of His richest work precisely through the moments our schedule had not anticipated.

Fourth, it asks us to pray by name. Long before anything else, a servant's disciples need to be carried to the Lord in prayer. The servant who prays for his disciples every morning — naming them, thanking God for them, asking the Holy Spirit to form each one — is doing more disciple-making at seven a.m. than anything he could possibly say from a podium at seven p.m.

Fifth, it asks us to be patient with the Spirit's timing. Some disciples grow quickly; others grow slowly; many grow in unexpected seasons, long after the servant had given up waiting. Our work is to remain faithful. The Spirit will decide when the fruit ripens, and some of the sweetest fruit of our service will ripen on trees we will not see bear.

May the Lord of the harvest, who Himself made the first disciples and who still calls each of us by name, give us grace to be faithful disciples ourselves and faithful makers of disciples. May He fill our small and ordinary investments with His own abundant life. And may He bring us all, at the end of our long service, into the company of those good and faithful servants who have invested what they were given and are welcomed, by a smiling Master, into the joy of their Lord.

Review Questions

1. Our Lord's command in the Great Commission is to 'make disciples,' not merely converts or hearers (Matthew 28:19–20, NKJV). What is the practical difference between making a convert and making a disciple, and how does that difference reshape the way we measure the fruit of our own service?
2. The Gospels sketch a disciple as one who has followed, listened, loved, borne a cross, abided in the Word, and borne fruit. Which of these six features is most vibrant in our own discipleship right now, and which needs the Spirit's watering most urgently?
3. St. Gregory the Great says the Lord 'lived first and taught out of His living.' Where in our own ministry have we been tempted to teach ahead of our living? What would realigning that order look like this month?
4. St. Paul's chain in 2 Timothy 2:2 reaches across four generations in one sentence. Who are the one or two disciples the Lord has placed within our reach to invest in deeply — not just to teach but to form — and what is the next step with each of them?
5. Our Lord balances the cost of discipleship with the promise of a hundredfold return (Mark 10:29–30, NKJV). Where in our walk with Him has this promise already proved true, and how does remembering it strengthen us to keep walking when the cost is currently heavy?

Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 28:18–20; Matthew 9:9; Matthew 16:24; Luke 10:39–42; Luke 14:26–27; John 8:31–32; John 13:35; John 15:8; Mark 10:29–30; 2 Timothy 2:2 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew, on Matthew 28.
- St. Gregory the Great, Pastoral Rule, Book II (on the life of the one who teaches).
- St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies (on apostolic succession and the rule of faith).

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, especially Homily LXIV.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies (on likeness as the goal of learning).

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

Lesson Notes

Mentorship

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

If the last lesson set our eyes on discipleship as the general calling of every servant, this one narrows in on the particular relationship that has always been its backbone: mentorship. The Lord Himself chose twelve — and within the twelve, three — and within the three, one whom He loved especially. The saints, without exception, were shaped by someone. St. Paul had Barnabas and Gamaliel. Timothy had Paul. Silouan had John of Kronstadt. Anthony of the desert had an older, silent brother whose name we do not know. Every servant who becomes fruitful does so, in some significant way, because an older voice walked beside him when he most needed it. And every servant who wishes to multiply that fruitfulness will, in turn, walk beside younger servants when they most need it. Mentorship is the intimate face of the chain of generations, and it is one of the most tender works the Spirit does through us. In this lesson we will sit with the Lord's own mentoring of the Twelve, watch Paul mentor Timothy and Barnabas mentor Paul, and learn from the Fathers what a healthy mentoring relationship looks like, how it begins, how it ripens, and how it is gracefully handed on.

The Master Who Mentored the Twelve

No figure in history has mentored more carefully or more fruitfully than our Lord Jesus Christ. We sometimes think of mentorship as a program, a curriculum, a series of scheduled meetings. What the Gospels show us is something quieter and more powerful — a Master who chose a small group, lived with them for three years, and formed them, day by day, into the men who would shape the world.

The initial call was warm and personal:

“Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons.” (Mark 3:14–15, NKJV)

Notice the order. That they might be with Him comes first. That He might send them out comes second. The sending is not possible without the being-with. Mentorship begins in presence, not in projects. A mentor who is never actually with his mentee — in the car, around a meal, on a walk, in silence during the Liturgy — has skipped the very ground on which formation happens. Our Lord gave three entire years to presence before any real mission was undertaken, and even during the mission, He kept calling them back to Himself to rest.

Within the Twelve He drew closer to three — Peter, James, and John — and within those three, John is called, in his own Gospel, 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.' This is not favoritism; it is capacity. A mentor cannot love everyone equally; he can only love everyone faithfully. Depth of relationship is limited by what human hearts can sustain. Our Lord Himself, being human as we are human, did not

spread Himself across three hundred equally close friendships. He had His three, and His twelve, and His wider circle, and His multitude — concentric rings, each loved, but not all at the same depth. This is a gentle permission for every mentor: we are not meant to mentor everyone. We are meant to mentor whom the Lord has given us, and to mentor them well.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on the selection of the Twelve, saw the principle clearly:

“The Lord did not hurry in the choosing of His own. He prayed through the night before He named them. The shepherd who names his sheep without prayer will lose them without warning. The shepherd who names them under prayer will not lose even one, save the son of perdition, and him not from neglect.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, XXXIII

Prayer precedes the choosing. This is the first quiet rule of a mentor's life. We do not pick up a mentee because the calendar had an empty slot; we pick up a mentee because, in prayer, the Lord has gently brought a particular soul to our heart and given us a quiet sense that we are to walk with this one for a season.

Barnabas, Who Opened the Door

One of the most moving mentoring stories in all of Scripture is the one we might miss on a first reading. It is the story of Barnabas and Saul — the story of an older, established servant who recognized the gift of a younger, troubled, newly converted man when no one else would take the risk of trusting him.

After his conversion on the road to Damascus, Saul returned to Jerusalem to join the disciples. No one believed that he had truly become a disciple. He had, after all, been the great persecutor. The Church was afraid of him, and understandably so. Every door was closed. And then comes a single sentence that changed the history of the Gospel:

“But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.” (Acts 9:27, NKJV)

Barnabas took him. Barnabas brought him to the apostles. Barnabas vouched for him publicly. The whole future of Paul's apostolic ministry hangs on the willingness of one older servant to take a risk on a younger one whom no one else would touch. Without Barnabas, there might not have been a Paul as we know him. Without Paul, there might not have been a Timothy, or a Titus, or an Epaphras, or any of the hundreds of second-generation disciples those letters touch. One old man's courage, one afternoon, blessed two thousand years of the Church.

And notice how Barnabas kept walking with Paul afterward. When the Antioch church needed a teacher, Barnabas, already serving there, went all the way to Tarsus to find Paul and bring him back to the work (Acts 11:25–26). When Paul and Barnabas set out on the first missionary journey, Barnabas's name is listed first (Acts 13:2). Somewhere along the way, as young Paul grew into his calling, the

names quietly reverse in the narrative — now it is Paul and Barnabas — and the mentor has become the junior partner in the partnership he himself called into being. Barnabas does not seem to have minded at all. A true mentor never minds being eclipsed by the one he has formed.

St. Augustine noted this quiet grace in Barnabas and drew the lesson for every mentor:

“The gardener rejoices when the young tree he has staked begins to stand on its own, and when, in time, the fruit of the tree hangs higher than the gardener can reach. He does not mourn that he can no longer reach the branches; he marvels that the seed he once planted has grown so tall.” — St. Augustine, Sermon 340 (on pastoral love)

This is the disposition every mentor must learn, and the earlier the better. We are not in the business of growing ourselves larger by acquiring disciples. We are in the business of growing our disciples larger by spending ourselves on them — and rejoicing, quietly, when they pass us.

Paul and Timothy — A Mentor's Voice in Ink

The Church is indescribably blessed to have preserved for us the private letters of a mentor to his mentee. The two letters to Timothy are not formal epistles addressed to a congregation; they are the deeply personal instruction of an aging apostle to his beloved spiritual son. Every mentor who reads them carefully will find a mirror in them, and every mentee will feel, between the lines, what it is to be loved by a father in the faith.

Paul opens his first letter with the tenderest of addresses:

“To Timothy, a true son in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1 Timothy 1:2, NKJV)

A true son in the faith. Not a subordinate, not a junior colleague, not a protégé — a son. This is the deepest mode of Christian mentorship, and it is the one we are always quietly aiming toward. We begin by walking alongside someone; if the Spirit blesses the relationship, over time, a quieter kinship forms, and we find ourselves relating to the person not as a project but as a child — or, for the mentee, relating to the mentor not as a resource but as a father in the Lord. This does not mean we replace their biological family or their father of confession; it means that an additional bond, rooted in the common life of the Spirit, has been given.

Paul's letters to Timothy are full of practical wisdom, but the thing a mentor learns most from reading them is the mixture of exhortation and warmth. Paul corrects Timothy — about letting people despise his youth, about being bold, about guarding the deposit of the faith — and yet every correction is laid on a bed of affection:

“I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day, greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy, when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you.” (2 Timothy 1:3–5, NKJV)

Mindful of your tears. Greatly desiring to see you. Remembering your genuine faith. These are the words of a father who loves his son. The corrections that follow land differently when the soil has been prepared this way. A mentor who corrects without first loving will be resisted. A mentor who loves first and corrects second will find his correction received as blessing.

And at the end of the last letter — written, we believe, from the last Roman imprisonment, shortly before his execution — Paul asks Timothy to come and to bring the cloak he left in Troas, and the books, and especially the parchments (2 Timothy 4:13). It is the request of an old man to a young one whose love can be counted on to make the journey. Paul's mentorship of Timothy did not end in a triumphant ceremony; it ended in a small practical request at the bedside of a tired saint. That ending is a gift in itself: mentorship is, at its heart, simply the trust of one soul that the other will come when called.

What a Mentor Actually Does

Beyond the high picture, the daily work of mentoring is composed of five small, repeatable practices, each of them unspectacular and each of them indispensable.

First, a mentor prays for his mentee by name. Every morning. Over the years. The intercession of a mentor for his mentee is probably the single most formative thing in the relationship, even though the mentee may never see or hear it. Many of the secret graces that come into a servant's life in his twenties and thirties were prayed into him by an older servant long before the younger one even knew enough to ask. A mentor who is not praying regularly for his mentee has already stopped mentoring.

Second, a mentor listens more than he talks. Younger servants usually arrive at a mentor's door with questions; the mentor's first temptation is to answer. The wiser path is usually to ask another question, and then another, and to let the mentee's own soul come into view before prescribing anything. Our Lord often answered questions with questions. This was not evasion; it was pedagogy. He was drawing out of the soul what the soul already knew but had not yet said.

Third, a mentor speaks honestly but gently when correction is needed. The world has many encouragers and many correctors; it has very few tender correctors. A mentor who cannot say a hard word will eventually be of no use, because every servant needs correction at some point in his formation. A mentor who can only say hard words will be avoided, because no human soul can bear unending severity. The tender corrector — who speaks the truth, once, clearly, and then sits in silence while the truth lands — is the mentor who changes lives.

Fourth, a mentor models more than he explains. The mentee is watching. Over years, the mentor's handling of stress, disappointment, praise, interruptions, and tiredness will teach the mentee more than any formal lesson could. This is why the Desert Fathers often said the simplest thing a young monk could do was to sit in the cell of an old one and watch. Ninety percent of formation happens by osmosis. The mentor's first responsibility, then, is to be, himself, someone worth watching — not because he has arrived but because he is visibly still growing.

Fifth, a mentor sends his mentee out. The goal of mentoring is not to keep the mentee close forever; it is to form him into a servant who can stand on his own and, eventually, mentor someone else. A mentor who cannot let the mentee go has not really mentored him; he has trained a dependent. Our Lord's mentoring of the Twelve ended, on earth, with a sending: Go, and make disciples. Every Christian mentorship ends, sooner or later, at that same doorway.

St. Basil the Great, writing about the formation of the younger brethren in his monastic communities, captured the rhythm of healthy mentoring with his usual balance:

“Hold the young servant close enough that he may learn, but not so close that he cannot grow. A vine too tightly bound to its stake cannot yield its fruit; a vine not bound at all will fall over. Wisdom is in the right tension of the cord.” — St. Basil the Great, The Long Rules, Q. 36

For the Mentee — The Holy Work of Receiving

Mentorship is not only about what the mentor does. It is also, and perhaps equally, about what the mentee does. Every servant who wants to grow into a mature disciple will, at some point, need to learn the holy work of being mentored. This is harder than it sounds, especially for those of us who have been told, all our lives, to be independent.

The first disposition the mentee must learn is openness. To be mentored is to allow another soul to see parts of our inner life we might have kept hidden. It is to confess struggles out loud, to ask questions we feel foolish asking, to reveal that we do not, in fact, have everything figured out. This openness is costly, and it is what separates a real mentoring relationship from a superficial one. The mentee who will not open his life cannot be mentored, no matter how wise the mentor.

The second is trust. The mentee must assume, until proven otherwise, that his mentor wants what is best for him. This is what allows the mentee to receive correction without flinching. Without trust, every correction feels like an attack; with trust, every correction feels like a gift. This is why choosing a mentor prayerfully matters so much — once the relationship begins, the mentee must be able to entrust himself to the mentor's care.

The third is patience. Mentorship is slow. The fruit takes years. The mentee who wants a fast answer to every question will be disappointed; the mentor often does not give the answer but asks the question that will let the mentee, in time, find the answer himself. A mentee who cannot bear the slowness of the process will leave before the formation ripens.

The fourth is gratitude. Mentors are not paid, and their deepest rewards are often invisible. The mentee who expresses, simply and honestly, that he has been helped, is already doing his mentor the greatest service the relationship can offer. A thank-you card, a quiet word after a meeting, a specific memory named years later — these small acts are how a mentee gives back to the one who has given him so much.

St. Paul's own thanks to his mentors shines through his letters. He mentions Barnabas again and again. He names those who taught him the faith before him. He even defers, at the Jerusalem Council,

to the older apostles whose ministry preceded his. The Apostle to the Gentiles never forgot that he had been mentored, and he never let pride about his own ministry erase his gratitude to those who had made it possible.

Abba Dorotheos of Gaza, himself one of the most beloved spiritual fathers in the tradition, wrote to one of his own mentees a sentence that belongs on the desk of every young servant:

“Hold your elder in honor, and you will hold yourself in the way of growth. The soul that cannot receive from an older hand will remain forever in its own narrow thought. Receive, receive, and you will be given what you could never have reached on your own.” — St. Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourse I, On Renunciation

The Gift We Keep Passing On

Every servant who has been mentored well is, by that very fact, put under a quiet obligation. The grace he received was not given to him merely for himself; it was given to him so that, in time, he would pass it to another. Mentors are made by having been mentored. The older generation, which once poured into us, steps back and says, in effect, 'Now it is your turn.' We receive that turn not with ambition but with humility — and, above all, with gratitude.

There is no strict formula for when a servant is ready to begin mentoring others. A helpful rule of thumb is this: when we find ourselves able to walk a certain road without stumbling, we are probably ready to begin walking that road alongside someone who has not yet learned it. We do not have to be masters; we only have to be one or two steps ahead. A sixteen-year-old can faithfully mentor a twelve-year-old. A forty-year-old can faithfully mentor a twenty-year-old. The essential thing is not the gap in age but the honesty of the walk.

St. Paul's final words to Timothy about this chain of generations remain, two thousand years later, the clearest description of how the Church grows:

“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2, NKJV)

Commit these to faithful men. Not to the most talented. Not to the most impressive. To the faithful. Mentorship is not for the charismatic few; it is for the faithful many. Every servant who has walked with the Lord long enough to have received something of His life has something worth passing on to someone a little behind him on the road.

May the Lord who mentored the Twelve and sent them to mentor the nations give each of us the mentor our soul needs and make each of us, in time, the mentor that some other soul needs. May He teach us to love our mentees with the quiet steadfastness of Barnabas, to write to them with the tenderness of Paul, and to send them out with the confidence of a Master who knows the Spirit will finish the work He has begun. And may the chain of generations, which our Lord Himself began on a mountain in Galilee, run right through our small service into hearts we will never meet on this side of the Kingdom.

Review Questions

1. Our Lord appointed the Twelve 'that they might be with Him' before He sent them out (Mark 3:14, NKJV). What does this order tell us about the priority of presence over projects in mentoring, and where have we been tempted to reverse that order in our own service?
2. Barnabas took a risk on Paul when no one else would (Acts 9:27, NKJV). Is there a younger servant in our life whom others have not yet taken seriously, and where might the Spirit be asking us to take a Barnabas-like risk on that person this year?
3. Paul addresses Timothy as 'a true son in the faith' (1 Timothy 1:2, NKJV) and places every correction on a bed of affection. Do our current mentees feel the affection first, or the correction first? What would it look like this month to lead with love in a specific relationship?
4. The lesson names five ordinary practices of a mentor: pray, listen, correct gently, model, send. Which of these are we doing well, and which one is the Spirit asking us to strengthen in the coming season?
5. The mentee's side of the relationship calls for openness, trust, patience, and gratitude. Where in our own receiving from a mentor or spiritual father are we currently holding back, and what would it look like to open that door a little wider?

Books & References

Scripture: Mark 3:14–15; Acts 9:27; Acts 11:25–26; Acts 13:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:3–5; 2 Timothy 2:2; 2 Timothy 4:13 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew (on the choosing of the Twelve).
- St. Augustine, Sermons on pastoral love (esp. Sermon 340).
- St. Basil the Great, The Long Rules (on forming the younger brethren).
- St. Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourses (especially Discourse I on renunciation and receiving).
- Sayings of the Desert Fathers (on the relationship of elder and disciple).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Words for Our Time (on the Christian servant's spiritual kinship).

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

Lesson Notes

Disciples - St. Andrew

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

St. Andrew walks quietly through the Gospels. He is named less often than his brother, speaks less often than Peter, and leaves behind no epistle. Yet the Church remembers him as Protokletos — the first-called — and as the one who brought his own brother to Christ. In this lesson we learn from a servant who labored without the spotlight: a man of spiritual desire, of supple obedience, and of quiet influence. His story is good news for the many of us who will never stand on a great stage. We can still bring one person to Jesus. We can still say, with the simplicity of our Lord Himself, 'Come and see.'

The First-Called

The earliest title the Church gave to St. Andrew is Protokletos, 'the first-called.' Before Peter was called from his nets, before James and John left their father in the boat, before anything that looks to us like the beginning of the Twelve, there is a quiet scene on the far side of the Jordan. The Baptist is standing with two of his disciples. Jesus passes by. The Baptist lifts his hand and says a single sentence that will split a life in two.

"Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, 'Behold the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do you seek?' They said to Him, 'Rabbi' (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), 'where are You staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour). One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother." John 1:35–40, NKJV

One of those two was Andrew. The Gospel does not pause to explain him. It simply records what he did: he heard, he followed, he stayed. When we think about our own calling, we sometimes expect something dramatic — a voice, a sign, a moment we could later describe to others. Andrew's calling was quieter. A pointing finger, a sentence about a Lamb, a half-day in the place where Jesus was staying. That was enough. The Lord does not always speak to us in thunder. Sometimes He speaks in a single sentence heard at the right hour, and the door of our life swings open.

The Byzantine tradition holds his title gently, not as a competitive rank over the other apostles, but as a testimony that the Lord's call reaches the hidden first, before the world notices. There is comfort here for every servant who wonders whether any of this began well. It began, for Andrew, not with a platform but with a willingness to walk a few steps and ask one question: 'where are You staying?' — and to accept the Lord's answer: 'Come and see.'

“What meaneth, 'Come and see'? He knew that they had not as yet clearly perceived the whole, and He reveals Himself to them by signs. For nothing is equal to experience and personal trial... and therefore He invites them to dwell with Him, as knowing that His very words would kindle in them a divine love.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John XVIII.1

Chrysostom notices something tender about that first invitation. Our Lord does not argue with Andrew. He does not recite doctrine. He opens His door and lets the young disciple stay. This is often how the Lord still calls us. He lets us sit with Him — in the liturgy, in a quiet reading of Scripture, in a conversation with a servant whose life has been shaped by Him — and the nearness does its own work.

The Brother Who Brought His Brother

Having stayed with Jesus for the remainder of that first day, Andrew does the most natural thing in the world for a man whose heart has just been moved. He goes looking for his brother.

“He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.” John 1:41–42, NKJV

This is the sentence that carries Andrew's whole ministry in miniature. He does not gather a crowd. He does not wait until he has mastered the teaching. He does not even make sure he himself is ready. He simply goes to the person closest to him and tells him what he has seen. Notice the word 'first' — 'he first found his own brother.' Before anyone else, he thought of Simon. Among the servants we will one day teach, the most difficult mission field will often be our own home: the brother we grew up beside, the sister who remembers our childhood, the parents who watched us stumble. Andrew went there first.

And he did not bring Simon to a sermon. He brought Simon to a Person. 'He brought him to Jesus.' This is the whole grammar of discipleship. We are not gathering followers for ourselves; we are gathering brothers for Christ. The work Andrew did that day changed everything that comes afterward in the Gospel. The man he brought became Peter. The sermon that Peter preached at Pentecost drew three thousand souls. Andrew is not credited in that number. He does not need to be. The Lord keeps a ledger of His own, and in that ledger the whole preaching of Peter rests in part on a brother's sentence spoken on a quiet afternoon in Galilee.

For our own service we learn two things. First, the fruit of what we do may not appear under our name. That is a hard truth for our pride and a beautiful truth for our peace. Second, the Lord works through proximity. He gave Andrew a brother; He has given each of us someone. A child to catechize patiently, a friend who is ready to hear, a cousin who is circling. 'He first found his own brother.' Perhaps our first work is the person already near us.

“Andrew, after having stayed with Jesus and having learned much... did not keep the treasure to himself, but hastens and runs quickly to his brother, to impart to him the good things which he had received. Mark how, from the very beginning, he shews the

fruit of a true friend, and of one who rightly loveth his brother.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John XIX.1

A Spiritual Hunger That Lasted

Long before Andrew was a disciple of Jesus, he was a disciple of the Forerunner. That one detail tells us something about the shape of his heart. He was already a man who went where the word of God could be heard. He stood in the wilderness, he listened to the stern preaching of repentance, he accepted baptism. When we meet him at the beginning of the Fourth Gospel, he is already formed as a seeker. He has not arrived at Christ by accident; he has spent months, perhaps years, positioning himself where God was speaking.

This is an often overlooked feature of Andrew's calling. Grace is sovereign, but grace also tends to find people who are already standing near a means of grace. The fisherman who has been listening to John the Baptist is the fisherman who is ready to follow the Lamb of God. The child who has been brought faithfully to the liturgy is the child whose heart is soft when the Lord finally speaks. Spiritual desire does not begin at the moment of our dramatic conversion. It begins, quietly, in all the places we chose to be near God when nothing dramatic was happening at all.

“As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.” 1 Peter 2:2–3, NKJV

Peter — the brother Andrew brought — will one day write that line. It is possible that some of it was learned in the school of Andrew's patient longing. Peter knew what it looked like for a man to desire the word of God like a hungry infant, because he had watched his own brother do it.

“For as fire, when placed near tinder, quickly sets it aflame, so also the soul that has received the Word of God kindles the souls that draw near to it with the love of God.” St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XVIII.7

Macarius's image is lovely and precise. Andrew did not set his brother on fire by the force of his personality. He set him on fire because he himself was already burning. A servant who is quietly hungry for God will find that other hungers gather around the warmth. We do not first have to become eloquent. We have to become honest. Are we still desiring God the way a small child desires milk? If the answer is yes, we will find that we are bringing people to Jesus almost without trying.

The Disciple Who Counted the Loaves

The second scene in which Andrew speaks is one of the most famous in the Gospels, but he himself is easy to miss in it. A great crowd has followed Jesus. Our Lord turns to Philip with a question meant to stretch Philip's faith: 'Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?' Philip does the arithmetic; he knows that two hundred denarii will not feed so many. And then, in the middle of the calculation, Andrew speaks.

“One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, 'There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?'"

John 6:8–9, NKJV

His sentence is a little awkward. It ends with a question that answers itself — 'what are they among so many?' He is not sure what he is doing. But he is doing something none of the other disciples in the scene is doing: he has noticed a small boy, and he has spoken about him to Christ. Philip counted the money. Andrew counted the loaves. The difference matters. When we carry a need to the Lord, we can bring Him our arithmetic of scarcity, or we can bring Him the small offering that is actually in our hands. Andrew does the second, even while he is not sure it will be enough.

Our Lord took the loaves. He multiplied them. Thousands ate and were filled. And the quiet miracle beside the great miracle is this: a nameless boy carried his lunch home in a story that the whole Church would tell for twenty centuries, because a discreet apostle noticed him in the crowd. When we think we have nothing worth bringing, let us remember Andrew. He did not hand Christ a solution. He handed Christ a boy.

There is a posture here for our service. Much of what we do will feel like Andrew's sentence — uncertain, half-formed, not quite adequate. We will bring a student whose faith is wavering and not know the right thing to say. We will offer a small prayer group, a visit to a sick parishioner, a hand-written note, and wonder whether any of it matters. The Lord does not ask us for adequacy. He asks us to hand Him the loaves we actually have. The multiplication is His work.

The Bridge for Those Who Came from Afar

The third Johannine scene in which Andrew speaks is even more quietly revealing. It is Holy Week. Greeks — that is, Gentiles who had come up to worship at the Passover — approach the disciple Philip and ask an astonishing thing.

“Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus.” John 12:20–22, NKJV

Notice the chain. The Greeks go to Philip. Philip does not go to Jesus by himself; he goes first to Andrew. And then Andrew and Philip together bring the request to our Lord. Why does Philip need Andrew? Something in the tradition of the Twelve had established Andrew as the one who knew how to bring strangers close. Perhaps it was because he had already done it for his own brother. Perhaps it was because he had done it for the boy with the loaves. Whatever the reason, when a Gentile seeker first appears in the Gospel of John asking to see Jesus, it is Andrew's name that the Holy Spirit gives us as the bridge.

This is the ministry of the discreet servant in a single sentence: 'we wish to see Jesus' — and a brother who will walk the request into the presence of the Lord. Many of the people who come to our churches will come that way. They will not announce themselves as seekers. They will approach a servant they

trust with a question that sounds practical, and underneath the question will be the ancient hunger of the Greeks at the feast. 'We wish to see Jesus.' Andrew's work is to hear that hunger and to make the introduction — not to become Christ for them, but to bring them to Him.

There is also a beautiful note for our own moment in history. The early Church remembered Andrew as the apostle who carried the Gospel beyond the familiar world — traditionally to Scythia, to the northern shore of the Black Sea, to places the other apostles had not yet reached. The disciple who first brought one Gentile to Christ at the feast later brought whole peoples. The pattern holds. The servant who has learned to welcome one stranger is the servant the Lord can send far.

The Quiet Leader

It is worth dwelling on the simple fact that Andrew is almost always introduced as 'Simon Peter's brother.' The evangelists are not being cruel; they are describing accurately. In the world's memory, Peter is the louder brother, the more visible figure, the rock. And yet the Fathers have always insisted that Andrew's discreet place is itself a grace, and that most of the Church's servants are actually called to live there.

“Andrew was the first fruit of the apostolic company. He led Peter to Christ. Let us then, brethren, imitate him. For if he, being the first, did not keep back for himself the grace of teaching, but brought others into the kingdom, much more ought we who are after him to labor earnestly for the salvation of our brethren.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John XIX.2

Chrysostom's point is pastoral. Most of us will not be Peter. We will not stand before crowds of three thousand. We will not write Gospels. Our parishes will not carry our names. But we are not therefore less fruitful. The measure of our service is not the size of the hall; it is the faithfulness of the bringing. A servant who, over a lifetime, has brought even one 'Peter' to the feet of Christ has spent his life well.

“He that wins souls is wise.” Proverbs 11:30, NKJV

Andrew's quiet leadership is also a leadership without rivalry. He stands beside a brother whose voice will always be louder, and there is no evidence in the Gospels of a sharp word, a competing claim, an attempt to rebalance the credit. He is a servant who has been freed from the need to be seen, and that freedom is itself a form of holiness. Many a servant has been undone not by persecution but by the slow acid of comparison — watching another servant be noticed, be praised, be promoted, while the Lord seems to pass us over. Andrew gently teaches us a different way to stand. The Lord saw him. The Lord named him. That was enough.

“Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” Ephesians 6:5–6, NKJV

The Legacy of a Discreet Life

Tradition tells us that Andrew was crucified on an X-shaped cross in Patras of Achaia, and that from the cross he preached for two full days before he gave up his spirit. The cross that bears his name is not the cross on which his Lord died; it is a smaller, slanted cross, as befits an apostle who never sought to occupy the same space as his Master. The story moves us precisely because it is of a piece with everything else we know about him. He found Christ quietly. He brought his brother quietly. He counted the loaves quietly. He introduced the Greeks quietly. And at the end, he suffered for the Name quietly, though for two full days his mouth did not stop preaching the Savior he had spent his life bringing to others.

The fruit of a discreet life is almost always larger than the life itself could have imagined. The Patriarchate of Constantinople counts Andrew as its founder. Nations far from Galilee remember him as their apostle. And in every parish of our Church, every time a servant turns to a brother and says 'come and see,' Andrew's work is being quietly continued.

We finish, then, with a small and practical question. Who is the Peter in our life? Who is the brother, the classmate, the parent, the cousin, the friend standing close enough that the Lord may be asking us, not to preach to crowds, but to find that one person and bring him to Jesus? Andrew did not wait to feel qualified. He did not wait until his theology was tidy. He went and he found his own brother.

"Come and see." John 1:39, NKJV

May the Lord who first said those words to Andrew at the tenth hour of a quiet afternoon say them again through us this week — in our homes, in our classrooms, in our parishes, in whatever hidden corner He has placed us. May He give us Andrew's hunger, Andrew's willingness to move, Andrew's freedom from comparison, and Andrew's simple love for the brother beside him. And may the Protokletos, the first-called, pray for us, that we who are called after him may bring to our Master the few loaves we carry, and watch Him multiply what we could never have multiplied ourselves.

Review Questions

1. Why is Andrew called Protokletos, and what does that title teach us about the way the Lord often begins His work in a life?
2. Andrew's first act after meeting Jesus was to go and find his own brother. Who are the people closest to us — at home, at work, in our parish — whom the Lord may be entrusting to our 'first' care?
3. Before Andrew ever met Jesus, he was already a disciple of John the Baptist. What does this tell us about the habits and places that prepare a servant to recognize Christ when He comes near?
4. In the feeding of the multitudes, Philip counted the money and Andrew counted the loaves. Where in our own service are we tempted to calculate scarcity instead of bringing to Christ the small offering already in our hands?

5. When the Greeks said, 'We wish to see Jesus,' Philip went first to Andrew. What qualities in a servant make others bring their seekers to him? How can we grow in those qualities?
6. Andrew lived his whole ministry in the shadow of a more visible brother without any sign of rivalry. What disciplines of the heart are needed so that comparison does not undo our service?
7. Reflect on the invitation 'Come and see.' How might we speak a version of those same words this week — to a student, a friend, a family member — without pressure, without argument, simply as a door opened to Christ?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, XVIII–XIX. Translated in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 14.
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Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

The Making of a Disciple - St. John the Beloved

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

The Church has given St. John the Evangelist many names — the Theologian, the Beloved, the Eagle of Patmos — but perhaps the deepest of them is hidden in the way he refers to himself in his own Gospel: 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.' He did not start there. He began as a fisherman's son, a Son of Thunder, ready to call fire down from heaven. The long, gentle work of the Master remade him. In this lesson we trace the shaping of a disciple across a whole life — from a first afternoon at the tenth hour, through the inner circle and the leaning on the Lord's breast, to the foot of the Cross, to Patmos, to an old man in Ephesus still whispering, 'Little children, love one another.' The making of a disciple is slow work, and St. John is our most patient witness to it.

The Young Fisherman Who Was Listening

Before John was a theologian, he was a fisherman. His father Zebedee owned boats; his mother Salome was among the women who would one day serve the Lord with their means and stand beside the Cross. He and his brother James worked the nets on the Sea of Galilee — the steady, pre-dawn labor of men whose lives are shaped by weather and water.

And yet, somewhere along the way, young John began to listen for more than fish. When the fierce prophet of the Jordan began to preach repentance, John walked out to hear him. He became one of the Baptist's disciples. The Gospel shows us this quietly in the first chapter of his own account: two of the Baptist's disciples are standing with him when Jesus passes by, and the second of them, unnamed, is almost certainly John himself — he is too humble to write his own name in the story he is telling.

"Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, 'Behold the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do you seek?' They said to Him, 'Rabbi' (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), 'where are You staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour)." John 1:35–39, NKJV

Notice the small and tender detail John remembers decades later: 'it was about the tenth hour.' An old man at the end of a long life still knows the afternoon hour in which his life was turned. Such is the memory of grace.

There is a quiet lesson here for the making of our own discipleship. Before our great calling, there is almost always a season of listening. John was already going out to hear the word preached. He was already among those who were willing to leave their boats for an afternoon of truth. The Lord did not find him at random; He found him where he had positioned himself to be found.

“Observe the care of the Evangelist. He has mentioned the hour, not carelessly, nor by accident, but to show the warmth and eager desire of those who came; for they were not content to have seen Jesus once, but remained with Him the whole day.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John XVIII.2

From that first tenth hour onward, John's life has a new center of gravity. The boats remain; the nets remain; but everything he does is now done in the pull of a Person he cannot stop remembering.

Son of Thunder

It is important for the shape of this lesson that we remember who John was before he became the Beloved. He and his brother James were given a nickname by our Lord Himself: Boanerges, Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17). The nickname is not entirely flattering. It describes a certain heat of temperament — a readiness to raise the voice, a hand quick to seize the levers of power, a zeal that has not yet been purified.

The Gospels preserve for us, with great honesty, the moments in which that thunder rolled. A Samaritan village refuses to receive our Lord on the road to Jerusalem, and the two brothers step forward with a terrible suggestion.

“And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, ‘Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?’ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them.’” Luke 9:54–56, NKJV

On another day, the two brothers — or their mother on their behalf, depending on the Gospel — come to our Lord asking for the seats at His right and left in the kingdom (Mark 10:35–40). The ambition is unvarnished. They want the places of honor. Our Lord does not crush them for the asking; He gently redirects their gaze to the cup He must drink.

It is easy to read those stories and wince for John. But they are part of the grace of his story, not a blemish on it. The disciple whom Jesus loved was not born loving well. He began as a zealous, ambitious, occasionally wrathful young man, and our Lord did not push him away for being that. Our Lord took him by the hand and slowly unmade the thunder and filled the emptied space with love. This is the real good news of John's life for the servants who come after him. We do not have to arrive at discipleship fully formed. We have only to come, and to keep coming, and to let Him do the long work of re-making.

“He called them Sons of Thunder, signifying that they would be heralds of the mysteries, full of power; yet the same men who once would have called down fire from heaven were afterwards sent to receive the Holy Spirit in the fire of Pentecost, that they might warm, not consume, the nations.” St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Homily LVI

In the Inner Circle

As the Gospel unfolds, our Lord draws a smaller circle within the Twelve. Peter, James, and John are taken where the others are not — into the house of Jairus for the raising of the little daughter (Mark 5:37), up the holy mountain for the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1), into the inner garden at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37). These three see the Lord in glory and the Lord in agony. They are the closest witnesses of both.

The Fathers have long asked why these three. Chrysostom answers gently: 'each of these three was elevated above the rest — Peter by exceedingly loving Him, John by being exceedingly loved by Him, and James by his ready response.' The Lord's choices are not capricious; He forms His closest disciples in the places of greatest disclosure because He is preparing them for the greatest service.

For John in particular, the Transfiguration was decisive. He saw uncreated light pour through the face of his Master. He heard the voice of the Father testify, 'This is My beloved Son.' Decades later, when he begins his Gospel, it is this memory that breaks the surface.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14, NKJV

'We beheld His glory.' The old apostle is remembering a mountain in Galilee, a cloud, a face bright as the sun. The making of a disciple passes, at least once, through an encounter in which we no longer simply believe in the Lord — we see Him. For us, that seeing may not be a Tabor. It may be a liturgy in which the veil grows thin, a prayer in which His presence becomes almost solid, a moment of suffering in which He holds us. The form differs; the gift is the same. The Lord is revealing Himself, quietly, to form us.

And Gethsemane matters too. Our Lord took John into the garden precisely because He wanted to be loved there. The disciple who will later preach the love of God learned love first by being trusted with his Master's sorrow. A servant is not finished being formed until he has been given some share in his Lord's grief — a sick person to sit with, a broken family to weep beside, a sin whose weight he begins to feel. The inner circle is not a circle of privilege. It is a circle of participation.

The Head on the Master's Breast

Of all the images in the Gospel of John, the one the Church has treasured most is the one in the upper room. The supper is ending; our Lord has washed the feet of His disciples; He has begun to speak of a betrayer. And then, with a restraint that is somehow more eloquent than a paragraph, the evangelist writes:

“Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved... Then, leaning back on Jesus' breast, he said to Him, 'Lord, who is it?'" John 13:23, 25, NKJV

The Beloved Disciple — and by now the Gospel has trained us to know that this is John — leans his head on the chest of his Master. The Greek word the Fathers love for this posture is 'epistethios,' literally 'upon the breast.' It is the same word used when the Evangelist tells us that the Only-Begotten Son is 'in the bosom of the Father' (John 1:18). A man who has learned to rest his head on the heart of Jesus has been drawn into the very pattern of the Son's own rest in the Father.

For the making of every disciple, this is perhaps the deepest image we will ever meet. Theology begins on the chest of Christ. We do not first figure the Lord out and then draw close; we draw close, and the knowing follows. John wrote the loftiest Gospel in the New Testament — the one that soars like an eagle into the eternal Word — because he had first learned to sit still against his Master's heart.

“He who reclined upon the bosom of the Master drank in the mysteries of the Godhead; and from that bosom, as from a fountain, there flowed forth to us the theology of the only-begotten Son.” St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate CXXIV.5

The practical shape of this for our own discipleship is very clear. Before we teach a class, before we draft a retreat, before we answer a question put to us by someone who is struggling, we need time on the breast of Christ. That is what the prayer rule is for. That is what the Eucharist is for. That is what the long, silent moments of the liturgy are for. Theology done without that rest becomes noise. Theology done from that rest becomes life-giving. A servant who has not learned to lean has nothing much to pass on.

At the Foot of the Cross

Of the male disciples, John alone is recorded at Golgotha. The rest are scattered in their fear; Peter is weeping in a corner of the city over his denial. But John stands — young, perhaps trembling — beside our Lady and the other faithful women. He is there when the Roman nails bite into his Master's hands. He is there when the sun goes dark. He is there when the voice he had heard by Galilee says, 'I thirst,' and 'It is finished.'

And because he is there, he is entrusted with the holiest of charges.

“When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.” John 19:26–27, NKJV

Our Lord, in the moment of His own utmost poverty, gives away the last treasure He has left on earth. He gives His mother to John. He gives John to His mother. The Fathers have seen in this a gift not only to one apostle but to the whole Church: through John, every disciple receives the Theotokos as a

mother, and through her, every disciple receives an image of the tenderness of the Lord's own care for us.

There is a test embedded in this scene for every disciple who comes after. Are we at the Cross? When our Lord is being crucified in some corner of our city — in the poor, in the suffering, in the forgotten — are we among the disciples who have fled, or among those who have remained? And are we the kind of servant to whom Christ could entrust His mother? Could He, dying, say to us, 'Take care of My people'? And would He trust us with it?

“The Lord, as He was about to depart out of this world, gave His disciple a mother; and she, who had stood by her Son in His passion, was given to His beloved in her motherhood, that both might find consolation, and that the Church herself might learn what it is to take the Mother of God into her home.” St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* III.23

John did take her home. From that hour — the Greek insists on the immediacy — the young apostle's house became, in a quiet way, the first shelter of the Mother of God. The disciple who had leaned on the Lord's breast now kept the Lord's mother under his roof. A disciple's home is always opened wider by discipleship; his family is always enlarged by his Master's love.

Patmos and the Eagle's Eye

Tradition tells us that after the Ascension, John stayed in Jerusalem until the falling asleep of the Theotokos, and that he then traveled to Ephesus, where he pastored the churches of Asia for the rest of his life. In the reign of Domitian — probably in the 90s after Christ — he was arrested for his witness, taken to Rome, thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil (from which the tradition says he emerged unharmed), and exiled to the small island of Patmos in the Aegean.

There, an old man alone on a rock, he was given a final gift. The Risen Christ visited him again, as He had visited him once by the Jordan at the tenth hour, and unveiled to him the end of all things.

“I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,' and, 'What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches...' Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw... One like the Son of Man... His eyes like a flame of fire... And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, 'Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.'” Revelation 1:10–17, NKJV

The hand the Risen Lord lays on John in Patmos is, in a sense, the same hand John had leaned against at the Last Supper. The discipleship that began in intimacy at the table now ends in intimacy on the island. The Lord is the same. The disciple has been kept.

The Church has traditionally given John the eagle as his symbol, because only the eagle can gaze directly into the sun. In Patmos, John was given to see the uncreated glory of the Lamb upon the

throne, the City coming down from heaven, the river of life flowing from the throne of God. A servant who has been faithfully formed across a lifetime is given, at the end, a clearer sight than he had at the beginning. We should not expect our spiritual vision to be at its brightest in our youth. It is often the old priest, the old mother, the old catechist, who has grown truly clear-eyed, because a long fidelity has washed their sight.

“The eagle is John; for he sought the heights, and flying above the clouds of human weakness, beheld with the keen and steady gaze of his heart the light of unchanging Truth.” St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate XXXVI.5

Little Children, Love One Another

The last portrait of the Beloved Disciple comes not from Scripture but from the living memory of the early Church. St. Jerome preserves for us a story he received from faithful witnesses, about the old apostle's final years in Ephesus. John had grown too frail to walk to the assembly of the faithful by himself. Younger disciples would carry him. When he arrived, he would say, again and again, only one sentence.

“When the blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age, and with difficulty was carried to the church in the arms of his disciples, and was unable to give utterance to many words, he used to say no more at their several meetings than this, 'Little children, love one another.' At length the disciples and fathers who were there, wearied with always hearing the same words, said, 'Master, why do you always say this?' And he replied in these memorable words: 'It is the Lord's commandment, and if it alone be kept, it is sufficient.'” St. Jerome, Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians III.6

There is almost nothing more beautiful in the life of the Church than this. The apostle who had begun as a Son of Thunder ended as an old man repeating one sentence. The long work of the Master had worn away every other word. What remained was pure gold.

This is the target of discipleship. Not a great ministry; not a famous name; not an impressive theology; but a life in which, at the end, we can say only what is essential, and what is essential turns out to be the commandment of the Lord. The making of a disciple is, in the end, the making of a lover. Everything else we gather along the way — knowledge, skill, reputation, even our cherished opinions — is sifted and most of it is let go. The love remains.

And so we come back to the scale of the parable. We began this lesson with the mustard seed.

“It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.” Luke 13:19, NKJV

A young fisherman at the tenth hour of a quiet afternoon is a very small seed. Decades later, an old man whispers 'little children, love one another' into a crowded church, and the branches of that one life have already begun to cover the world. They are still covering it. We sit under those branches

whenever we open the Fourth Gospel. We sit under them whenever we read 'God is love.' We sit under them whenever we lift our heads to find the Mother of God keeping watch over the Church.

May the Lord who called the young John at the tenth hour, who trained him in the inner circle, who let him lean upon His breast, who entrusted His mother to him at the Cross, who kept him through exile and the sight of glory, and who in the end distilled his whole life down to a single commandment — may the same Lord undertake the same patient work in us. We do not need to begin this lesson as finished disciples. We have only to place ourselves where He is passing, to follow when He says, 'Come and see,' and to trust Him with the long making of the rest.

Review Questions

1. The evangelist John notes that he first followed the Lord 'about the tenth hour.' What does this small remembered detail teach us about the way grace marks a life, and can we name a 'tenth hour' of our own?
2. Before he became the Beloved, John was a Son of Thunder — ready to call down fire on a Samaritan village. What temperaments in our own hearts may the Lord be patiently unmaking, and how have we seen Him do that work already?
3. Our Lord drew Peter, James, and John into an inner circle in which they saw both Tabor and Gethsemane. What are the 'inner circle' moments of our own service — the places of both disclosure and participation in His grief?
4. The Beloved Disciple leaned on the Master's breast at the Last Supper. What disciplines of prayer and silence allow a servant today to 'lean' before teaching, so that our theology flows from rest and not from noise?
5. John alone is recorded among the male disciples at the foot of the Cross, and there he received the Mother of God into his home. Where is our Lord being crucified in our own city, and is He able to entrust His people to our care?
6. On Patmos, the old apostle received the Revelation — a clearer sight than he had at the beginning. What might it mean for us to trust that our spiritual vision is meant to grow clearer, not dimmer, as our fidelity lengthens?
7. Jerome preserves for us the image of the aged apostle repeating only one sentence: 'Little children, love one another.' If our life were distilled to a single sentence at its end, what sentence would we hope the Lord had taught us to say — and what choices now would shape it?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, XVIII–XIX, LXXXV. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 14.
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- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John. St. George's Coptic Orthodox Church, Sporting, Alexandria.
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, The School of Alexandria Before Origen, chapter on St. John the Evangelist.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning. The Jerome fragment on the aged John is traditional and appears in his commentary on Galatians.

Lesson Notes

Unit 2

Work and Challenges of the Service

Unit 1 gave us the ground on which the servant stands, who he is, who his Lord is, where his strength comes from, and in whose company he walks.

Unit 2 steps from the ground into the actual labor. Here we meet the service as it is lived: the courage it asks of us, the temptations that would turn us aside, the gifts we are asked to trade, and the dangers a servant must watch for along the way. And here we also look honestly at the particular conditions under which we serve; in a modern calendar that pulls our attention in every direction, in a country whose air both helps and hinders the Gospel, and in a digital noise that shapes our souls whether we notice it or not.

The unit is in two sections. Section 2.1, Challenges of Service, gathers the interior tests that meet every servant across every generation. Section 2.2, Contemporary Issues in Service, turns to the conditions of our own time.

CHAPTER

2.1 CHALLENGES OF SERVICE

Courage in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

There are seasons in every servant's life when the work itself requires not only fidelity but courage. A word must be spoken that no one else is willing to speak. A person must be loved who makes himself hard to love. A stand must be taken when an easier posture is available. A cross, small or large, must be picked up in the middle of a Tuesday. This lesson looks at courage as the Scriptures and Fathers understand it — not as a temperament some of us were born with and others were not, but as a gift of the Holy Spirit given to those who ask for it, and strengthened through use. We will see that the courage of the servant is not bravado and not stubbornness; it is the steady willingness to remain where the Lord has placed us, speak what He has asked us to speak, and endure what He has permitted us to endure, because He Himself is with us there.

The Shape of Christian Courage

The world's picture of courage is often a moment — a decisive act caught in the spotlight of a crisis. The Scripture's picture of courage is almost the opposite. It is long. It is usually quiet. It consists, most of the time, in simply not running away. The Greek word the New Testament uses most often for courage is *tharseo*, a word our Lord Himself speaks to frightened disciples on more than one occasion: 'Be of good cheer; it is I; do not be afraid' (Matthew 14:27). Courage, in His mouth, is the other side of fear dissolved by His nearness.

"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

Notice the grammar of His sentence. Our courage is not a quality we must first manufacture; it is a consequence of His victory. 'I have overcome.' The world's pressure is real, but it is no longer final. The servant who grasps this in his bones can stand where others sit down.

Augustine gives us a lovely small definition that has traveled down the centuries:

"Fortitude is the love of God bearing all things readily for His sake." St. Augustine, On the Morals of the Catholic Church XV

Courage, for the Christian, is love in its enduring form. It is not detached bravery; it is affection for the Lord strong enough to carry the weight that love always eventually asks us to carry.

The Fear That Silences Us

Most of us do not lose our courage in a moment of persecution. We lose it, bit by bit, to smaller fears — the fear of being disliked, the fear of being misunderstood, the fear of losing standing with a friend or a family member. These fears have a name in the Scriptures: the fear of man.

“The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe.”
Proverbs 29:25, NKJV

Proverbs calls it a snare — a trap that catches animals by the leg. That is exactly what it does to servants. It catches us when a hard truth ought to be said in love and we say nothing. It catches us when a student is wandering and we do not want to be the one to raise the question. It catches us when the culture around us is moving against the Gospel and we would rather not be noticed.

Our Lord speaks directly to this fear in the instruction He gives His disciples before sending them out.

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Matthew 10:28, NKJV

The cure for the fear of man is not a larger dose of self-confidence; it is a larger awe of God. When the Lord grows heavier in our sight, the opinions of men grow lighter. This is not a technique; it is a slow reorientation of the heart that happens in the places of prayer and worship the previous unit described.

Courage to Speak

One of the particular courages asked of a servant is the courage to speak. The prophets knew this. Jeremiah was told to stand and speak at the city gate; Ezekiel was placed as a watchman whose silence would be accounted against him. The New Testament continues the pattern. The apostles before the Sanhedrin did not argue; they simply bore witness.

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.” Acts 4:13, NKJV

The Greek word for 'boldness' here is *parrhesia* — freedom of speech, the frankness of those who have nothing to hide and nothing to lose. The council noticed that this boldness was not the product of their education; it was the residue of their company. They had been with Jesus, and courage was what the nearness had left behind in them.

For our own work, the application is direct. A servant who stays close to the Lord receives, almost without noticing, the gift of speech when it is needed. A servant who has drifted from that nearness will find the words difficult to come by, because *parrhesia* is not mainly a technique but a trace. We need to guard, therefore, not only the moments of hard conversation but the hours of quiet communion that precede them.

“The sign of a man who has true freedom of speech before God is not that he speaks much, but that his words, few or many, come forth unafraid, having been first spoken in prayer.” St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 28

Courage to Stay

There is a particular kind of courage that does not look like courage at all — the courage to stay. A servant who has been loving a difficult community for seven years and has not left is exercising a discipline that a single dramatic act could never match. The temptation in every difficult service is to find a reason to move on: a new parish, a new ministry, a new group of people who may be easier. Sometimes the Lord does move us; more often, He calls us to remain.

“Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.” Galatians 6:9, NKJV

The phrase 'lose heart' is the exact opposite of courage. To lose heart is to be emptied of the Lord's own encouragement, and the remedy is not a bigger push but a deeper drinking from the well. A servant who is considering giving up should first ask whether he is drinking.

Isaac the Syrian, who spent his life observing the long perseverance of the monks, wrote with the tenderness of one who had stood beside many who were ready to give up:

“Do not say, 'I cannot.' Say, 'Yet a little, with the Lord's help.' A thousand times the good man falls, and a thousand times he rises. This very pattern is the beauty of his life before God.” St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies XLVII

The servant who rises again is the servant who is exercising courage in its truest form — the courage not to let yesterday's failure decide tomorrow's faithfulness.

Courage to Be Unseen

A less obvious courage, but one essential to the long life of the servant, is the courage to labor without being seen — and to labor especially when it would be easy to arrange for the work to be noticed. The Lord has warned us, in the gentlest and most pointed way, that the praise we harvest from men is the whole reward we will ever receive for that particular deed.

“Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Matthew 6:1, NKJV

Courage to be unseen means that we are willing to do the hidden work — the prayer offered in a room with the door closed, the quiet note of encouragement unsigned, the extra hour with the struggling student after everyone has gone home — because we are serving an Audience whose reward is real and whose memory is perfect. This is the same courage that St. Andrew possessed, as the previous unit described: a freedom from the need to be noticed.

It takes courage to be unseen precisely because we are social creatures who feed on recognition. The servant who offers his labor to the Lord rather than to his peers is learning the deepest freedom a human being can learn.

Growing the Gift

Courage, like every fruit of the Spirit, is grown rather than manufactured. The Scriptures and the Fathers agree on the means by which it grows.

First, courage grows by remembered presence. 'Fear not, for I am with you' is the sentence God gives His servants again and again — to Abraham, to Moses, to Joshua, to Jeremiah, to Paul. The deliberate remembering that He is with us in the current difficulty is itself an exercise of courage.

"Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you."

Deuteronomy 31:6, NKJV

Second, courage grows by small obediences. The large stand is prepared for, silently, by thousands of small ones. A servant who has spoken the gentle truth in a dozen small conversations is a servant who will be ready when a hard one comes. We practice courage the way a musician practices scales.

Third, courage grows by the prayers of the Church. We do not have to generate bravery alone. The Divine Liturgy is full of petitions that the servants of God be strengthened, and those petitions are not decorative. They are answered — sometimes suddenly, more often slowly, always reliably.

Fourth, courage grows by the stories of the saints. When we are afraid of a difficult conversation, it helps to remember that St. Athanasius stood against the whole empire, that St. Moses the Black left the wilderness to welcome his executioners with tea, that St. Mary of Egypt walked into her own long desert, that the martyrs sang on their way to the flames. Their courage is ours too, if we are willing to be drawn into their company.

May the Lord who has overcome the world make us, in our small daily hour, servants who are not afraid. May He give us the parrhesia of those who have been with Him, the patience of those who do not grow weary, the hiddenness of those who serve His eyes only, and the peace of those who know He has not left them alone in the work. May we say in every season what Joshua was told to say on the edge of the Jordan: 'The Lord my God is with me wherever I go.'

Review Questions

1. Our Lord's own definition of courage — 'be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' — roots courage in His victory rather than our temperament. Where in our current service are we being invited to stand on His victory rather than on our own strength?

2. Proverbs names the 'fear of man' as a snare. What specific fear of others (disapproval, being misunderstood, losing a relationship) most often catches us, and what would it look like this week to be freed from it?
3. The apostles' boldness before the Sanhedrin was the residue of their company with Jesus. How does our current rhythm of prayer and worship protect, or erode, the parrhesia we need for the conversations ahead of us?
4. The courage to stay is often harder than the courage to act. Where are we tempted to leave a difficult field the Lord is asking us to remain in, and what drinking from the well would renew us there?
5. The Lord warns that deeds done to be seen receive their reward from the seeing. Where in our service is the secret audience of the Father being quietly traded for the audience of our peers?
6. Isaac the Syrian says, 'A thousand times the good man falls, and a thousand times he rises.' How does this picture of courage as repeated rising change the way we evaluate a week that has felt full of failure?
7. Name one saint whose courage speaks to our current situation. What does walking, for a moment, in that saint's company make possible for us today?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
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Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

Avoiding Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Before we can labor faithfully in the Lord's vineyard, we must recognize the many gentle and respectable ways by which a servant's heart learns to avoid the work. The Scriptures are candid about this. Moses hid behind his unfit lips. Jonah ran to Tarshish. The rich young ruler turned sorrowfully away. The invited guests in the parable sent polite excuses. None of these stories is about monstrous wickedness; each is about a human heart finding a reasonable way to step back from a call. In this lesson we look at the faces avoidance wears in a servant's life, why it works so quietly on us, and what grace the Lord has provided so that our 'no' can be turned into a yes. The goal is not self-reproach but clear-eyed honesty — the honesty without which none of us will finish the race.

The Many Faces of Avoidance

Avoidance rarely announces itself. It does not say, 'I will not serve the Lord today.' It speaks in the language of reasonable constraints and appropriate priorities. A servant who has learned to spot its voice is a servant who has taken a large step toward fidelity.

Jonah is perhaps the clearest portrait in the Scriptures. The Lord said 'Go to Nineveh.' Jonah's feet were already moving toward Tarshish before his prayer had finished. 'But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord' (Jonah 1:3). The direction is striking: not toward Nineveh, not toward another assignment, but away from the presence of the Lord. Avoidance, when we follow it far enough, always points us away from Him.

Moses, by contrast, shows us avoidance dressed in humility. 'O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue' (Exodus 4:10). It sounds self-effacing. It is also a refusal. The Lord's patience with Moses is lovely, but it is patience with a reluctance that was real.

The invited guests in our Lord's parable give us the most modern face of avoidance:

"But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.' Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'" Luke 14:18–20, NKJV

Land, labor, family. Not evils — goods. Each guest had a good reason. And yet the evening of the Master's supper passed them by. The most dangerous avoidances of the servant are almost always defended by something good.

For our own examination, it helps to name the common varieties: the busyness that never quite frees a Saturday; the self-doubt that waits for credentials that will never come; the perfectionism that will start serving once circumstances are right; the over-commitment that has no room to say yes because it has not learned to say no; the private hurt that makes us step back from the very people the Lord is asking us to step toward. None of these is wicked; each, unchallenged, quietly absorbs the life of a would-be servant.

The Root Beneath the Faces

Underneath the many faces of avoidance there is almost always a single root: fear. Sometimes it is the fear we examined in the previous lesson — fear of man, fear of failure. Sometimes it is a more tender fear: the fear of being changed. The servant who truly gives himself to the Lord will not come back the same. He will be asked to love people he had not planned to love, to forgive what he had not planned to forgive, to let go of what he had not planned to release. The Lord does not hide this cost, and a part of us knows it, and the part that knows it often pulls on the brake.

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” Matthew 16:24, NKJV

Chrysostom speaks gently to this fear:

“Why do many turn away from the Master's call? Not because they hate the Master, but because they love the cross less than they love their ease. Yet the cross, when it is embraced, is found to be lighter than the burden of avoiding it.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew LV.2

The pastoral point is important. Most people who are avoiding service are not rebels; they are simply afraid. A servant who understands this will treat himself — and others who are hesitating — with the tenderness the Lord Himself showed to Moses at the burning bush.

Busyness as a Shield

One particular face of avoidance deserves its own paragraph because it is the most common in our time. It is busyness — a life so full of approved activity that there is no room to hear the call more deeply. Busyness is the respectable avoidance. It makes us look responsible while we are, in fact, arranging our schedule so that the Lord cannot interrupt us.

“And they all with one accord began to make excuses.” Luke 14:18, NKJV

The servant must periodically audit his calendar with this question: is any of what fills my week actually a hiding place? The answer will often be surprising. Not always — work and family are real callings — but sometimes. The practice of a weekly quiet hour before the Lord, calendar in hand, is one of the most faithful disciplines a servant can keep.

St. Basil, who pastored a large and active city, writes with a clarity worth carrying:

“We fill our lives with many things that have no weight in heaven, and then wonder that we have no time for the One who has weight in heaven and earth. Let us begin every season by asking what must be laid aside, and then by laying it aside in fact.” St.

Basil the Great, Letter II (To Gregory)

The Cost of Avoidance

It is important to face, with sobriety and without fear, what is at stake when avoidance wins. Jonah is again our teacher. His running did not keep him safe; it put him in a storm, and in the belly of a great fish, and in a darkness he had not bargained for. The Lord's mercy retrieved him — and it will retrieve us — but the storm is real.

The parable of the talents, which we will study in the next lesson, ends with a judgment we would rather not quote but must. The servant who hid his talent was not condemned for wickedness in the ordinary sense; he was condemned for fear that had become refusal.

“His lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant...'" Matthew 25:26, NKJV

The word 'lazy' here is the Greek *okneros* — hesitant, shrinking, given to drawing back. The Lord uses a surprisingly strong word for what looks, from the outside, like modest caution. The reason is clear: the kingdom is not served by burying what has been entrusted to us. Our gifts are for the using.

The cost of avoidance is also felt in the souls we might have served. There is a classroom, a parish, a neighbor, a cousin, a child who would have been reached by our yes, and who will not be reached if our yes never comes. We do not know who these people are, but the Lord does. Every servant who is tempted to back away from the work should pause for a moment and consider whether a name he does not yet know is waiting for the sentence only he can speak.

The Grace That Meets Our Reluctance

The Scriptures are not harsh with reluctance; they are patient with it. The Lord answered Moses not with a rebuke but with a brother: 'Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well... And you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth' (Exodus 4:14–15). The Lord answered Jonah by following him into the storm. The Lord answered Peter's denials not with dismissal but with a lakeside breakfast and three renewed invitations to feed His sheep.

This is our hope when we see avoidance in ourselves. The Lord does not shame us for it. He simply, tenderly, calls again. The right response to noticing that we have been avoiding is not despair or self-punishment; it is to turn and come back.

“Return to Me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.” Malachi 3:7, NKJV

Macarius, writing to monks who had many reasons to give up, gives a warm sentence that every servant should memorize:

“If the soul that has drawn back will but turn her face again toward the Lord, she shall find Him already standing in the road to meet her. For He never ceased going out in search of her, even while she was going out in search of reasons.” St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XIX (paraphrased)

Saying Yes Today

Avoidance is defeated not by resolutions for next month but by a small yes today. The servant who is listening will usually know what today's yes is. It is the email he has been postponing, the conversation he has been rehearsing, the commitment he has been half-making. Our Lord's method is almost always to ask for the next small step, not the whole staircase.

It also helps to name, specifically, what we are avoiding. Avoidance lives on vagueness. The moment we write down the thing — 'I have been avoiding calling my brother for six months,' or 'I have been avoiding saying yes to teaching Sunday school' — it begins to lose its hold. Confession is once again the great unbinder. Many a servant's first step out of a long avoidance has been a frank word spoken to a father of confession.

And it helps to remember that we are not being asked to serve on our own strength. The same Lord who calls us promises to come with us. 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20). The yes we give today is met by a grace we could not have produced, and it is that grace, not our courage, that will carry the work.

May the Lord who has called us by name have patience with our running, and may He call us again, as He called Jonah, as He called Moses, as He called Peter, as He called each saint whose name we love. May He deliver us from the respectable avoidances of our time — the calendar too full, the excuse too reasonable, the self-doubt too familiar — and may He draw from us today, not tomorrow, the small yes that places us once again in the path of His work. Every yes given today becomes, by His grace, the foundation of a faithful life.

Review Questions

1. Of the faces of avoidance named in this lesson (busyness, self-doubt, perfectionism, over-commitment, private hurt), which is most active in us right now, and how do we recognize its voice?
2. Jonah's flight pointed away 'from the presence of the Lord.' When our own avoidance is followed to its source, where does it point, and what does that tell us?
3. The invited guests in Luke 14 used goods (land, labor, family) to decline the Master's supper. Which of the good things in our life has lately been quietly used to say 'excuse me' to Him?

4. Fear of being changed often lies under our reluctance to serve. What change is the Lord currently asking us to allow Him to make, and what gentle step could we take toward it this week?
5. Busyness is the respectable avoidance. If we audited this week's calendar in a quiet hour before the Lord, what is one thing we might see that we have not been willing to see?
6. The parable of the talents condemns the servant not for wickedness but for hesitation that became refusal. Where has our own hesitation begun to harden, and what would renewed investment look like?
7. Malachi offers the Lord's word: 'Return to Me, and I will return to you.' What is the one small 'today yes' by which we might turn and begin the return?

Books & References

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Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
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Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

Trading with Our Talents

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) is one of our Lord's most searching stories about the life of a servant. A master goes on a journey and entrusts his property to his slaves. Two of them trade with what they have been given; one buries it and waits for the master's return. When the master comes back, the two who traded are praised and given more; the one who buried is reproached and sent away. The previous lesson of this section, 'Discovering Our Talents,' asked what the Lord has placed in our hands. This lesson asks the next question: now that we know what has been given, what does it mean to trade with it? The parable is not about financial investing; it is about the active, responsible, risk-accepting deployment of every gift the Lord has entrusted to us — for His kingdom, on His timetable, with the expectation that He will one day ask for an account.

The Parable Reread

Let us set the story before us again, slowly, because familiarity sometimes dulls its edge.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.” Matthew 25:14–18, NKJV

Three details are worth noticing. First, the master gives 'to each according to his own ability.' The distribution is not arbitrary; it is tailored to what each servant can actually handle. This is important for our own examination: the Lord knows what we can carry, and He has given us neither too much nor too little.

Second, the two faithful servants 'went and traded.' The verb is active, immediate, and without hesitation. They did not wait for further instruction. They had been given, and they went.

Third, the servant who was given the least is the one who buried. The parable is gentle here: small gifts tempt us to inaction more than large ones. 'It is only one talent; why bother?' The logic of the buried talent is the logic of many small servants who have stopped serving because their gift seemed too modest to matter.

What Trading Means

To 'trade' with a talent, in the language of the parable, means three things at once. It means to use it — actually to deploy it in the real world, not only to cultivate it in private. It means to risk it — to place it where loss is possible, because no gain is possible without risk. And it means to multiply it — to expect, by the Lord's grace, that what is used faithfully will increase.

“For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.” Matthew 25:29, NKJV

This sentence is a parable of spiritual physics. A gift used grows; a gift hidden atrophies. The student who teaches what she has learned knows it twice as well by the end of the semester. The musician who plays before people learns more in an evening of risk than in a month of private practice. The servant who quietly visits the sick discovers gifts of presence he did not know he had. The law is reliable: the Lord multiplies what is placed in His service.

Chrysostom saw this with great clarity:

“God hath given to each of us something; to one more, to another less. But from each He requireth the using, not the number. The woman who gave two mites was praised more than the rich who cast in much; for she traded all she had, while they but risked a portion.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew LXXVIII.2

Why the Third Servant Failed

The third servant is worth pausing over, because most of our failures look more like his than like a dramatic rebellion. He did not steal the money. He did not spend it on himself. He simply kept it safe until the master returned. His defense, when it came, was careful:

“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

Two things undid him. First, he had a wrong picture of his master — 'a hard man.' That picture of the Lord is still common. Some of us serve from fear rather than love, and fear is always cautious. It hides. It plays not to lose rather than to gain. A servant who pictures God as a strict accountant will almost always bury what he has been given.

Second, he let fear drive his action. 'And I was afraid, and went and hid.' Fear, as the previous lesson said, is often the root beneath avoidance. Here it is given its crispest outcome. The buried talent is not simply unused; it is actively kept away from the work for which it was given.

The master's response is sharp but also revealing:

“You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the

bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.”

Matthew 25:26–27, NKJV

Even fearful servants, the master says, had options. They could have entrusted the gift to others who would have used it. No one is released from the obligation to put the talent to work; the form of the trading may differ, but the trading itself is not optional.

Trading in the Life of the Parish

Let us bring the parable into the concrete life of a servant. Trading with our talents means different things in different gifts.

A servant gifted in teaching trades by teaching — not waiting until he has read every book, but opening the Scriptures patiently with whoever is placed in front of him. Every small class is capital put to work.

A servant gifted in hospitality trades by opening her home — even when it is not tidy, even when the food is simple. The lonely who are fed at her table are the multiplication of her gift.

A servant gifted in administration trades by organizing the quiet labor that allows ministries to run — budgets, schedules, follow-up. Most parishes that bear fruit for decades do so on the back of unseen administration.

A servant gifted in prayer trades by praying — taking seriously the names brought to him and carrying them before the Lord. The talent of prayer is the most easily buried because no one else can see whether we are using it.

A servant gifted in music trades by singing — leading the people in praise, even when tired, even when the acoustics are unkind. The gift returns to the Lord through the mouths of those who sing with us.

A servant gifted in listening trades by listening — setting down the phone, sitting with the hurting, hearing what has not been said. This talent is often overlooked; it is one of the most fruitful ones the Lord gives.

A servant gifted in handiwork trades by using those hands — keeping the church building clean, the icons dusted, the altar linens cared for. The Lord multiplies what is offered with love.

Trading Is Risk

It is important not to domesticate the parable. The two faithful servants took real risk. Trade in the first century meant caravans that could be robbed, ships that could sink, merchants who could cheat. The master did not guarantee that every deal would succeed; he simply asked that the capital be used.

The same is true in the Lord's service. We will sometimes teach a class that does not go well. We will sometimes open our home to a guest who wounds us. We will sometimes pray for a sick person who dies. Trading with our talents does not promise immunity from loss; it promises that loss is not the end of the story. The Lord, unlike human markets, honors the trying itself, provided the trying is done in love.

“Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.”
Colossians 3:23–24, NKJV

St. Gregory the Great speaks to the fearful servant in each of us:

“He who, from dread of failure, buries the talent committed to him, is not on that account innocent. For the Master requires not miracles at the hand of His servant, but labor. To try, and to fall short, is better than not to try. The earth in which the talent was buried is the hardened heart that chose safety over service.” St. Gregory the Great, Homilies on the Gospels IX.1

The Joy of the Master

The end of the parable is the part we most often overlook. The reward for the two faithful servants is not only more talents; it is something larger.

“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 25:21, NKJV

'Enter into the joy of your lord.' That is the whole goal of the trading. Not the accumulation of more work. Not the applause of the parish. Not a position in the hierarchy. The joy of the Lord — participation in His own delight at the work that has been done in His kingdom. This is the reward the faithful servant will one day receive, and it will be found to be worth every risk, every tiring Tuesday, every disappointment the trading cost.

For now, we have the gifts He has given, and we have the day He has given us. The parable does not ask us to do what we cannot do. It asks us to do what we can, today, with what is in our hand. A single phone call to a grieving friend. A class prepared with love. A small donation offered quietly. A prayer said faithfully at the right hour.

May the Lord who has entrusted to each of us according to His own wise knowledge of our capacity give us the simplicity to stop burying what He has given, the courage to place it at risk for the sake of His kingdom, and the patience to watch Him multiply what we could never have multiplied on our own. And may we hear, on the day we long for most, the sentence every servant's whole life is aimed at: 'Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

Review Questions

1. The master gave 'to each according to his own ability.' How does it change our sense of our own gifts to know that the Lord has given us neither too much nor too little, but exactly what we can handle?

2. The two faithful servants 'went and traded' immediately. What gift has been given to us that has been waiting for a permission we were never actually asked to wait for?
3. The third servant's picture of his master ('a hard man') shaped his inaction. What picture of the Lord have we been serving from, and does it match the One we meet in the Gospels?
4. Fear is the root beneath the buried talent. Where in our service is fear still choosing safety over risk, and what would stepping out look like?
5. Name the specific gift the Lord has placed in our hands. How is it currently being 'traded' — actually used in real lives — and where could the trading be more generous?
6. Trading accepts the possibility of loss. Can we name a recent loss in our service that, in the Lord's economy, may already have been multiplied in ways we cannot see?
7. The faithful servant's reward is to 'enter into the joy of your lord.' How does keeping this end before us change the feel of the tired Tuesday, the difficult meeting, the discouraging class?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

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Lesson Notes

Danger - Caution in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Service in the Church is a holy work, and for that very reason it is attended by spiritual dangers that the servant must learn to recognize. The enemy does not waste his attention on those who are asleep; he attends most carefully to those who are awake and laboring for the Lord. The Fathers speak with a sober realism about the temptations that come to the servant precisely because he is serving — pride, spiritual fatigue, comparison, manipulation, the confusion of the Lord's work with our own, and the gradual dimming of the inner life beneath the outer labor. This lesson is not meant to frighten us out of the field. It is meant to send us into the field with our eyes open, so that the very work we have been given does not become the ground of our falling.

Why Servants Are Especially Tempted

There is a sober line in the Scriptures that every servant would do well to carry in memory:

“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” 1 Corinthians 10:12, NKJV

Paul writes this in the very midst of recounting Israel's failures in the wilderness. Those who had been fed with manna, who had drunk from the rock, who had seen the sea opened before them — those very ones fell. Spiritual privilege is not a shield against spiritual danger; it is sometimes an occasion for it. A servant who has stood for a long time at the altar, taught many classes, led many groups, may be precisely the one for whom the next step requires the greatest care.

St. Macarius the Great, who watched many monks for many years, observes this pattern with tenderness:

“The enemy does not trouble those who are not fighting; he troubles those who are fighting, and especially those who are on the point of advancing. Let the servant therefore not be surprised when the storm gathers most heavily over the very work the Lord has most blessed.” St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XXVI

Understanding this up front protects us from two equally unhelpful reactions — the surprise that keeps a servant from anticipating attack, and the discouragement that reads attack as evidence that we are off the road. The opposite is often true. The strongest winds usually blow on the trees that are bearing the most fruit.

Pride — The First and Most Subtle Danger

Of all the dangers the servant faces, pride is the first named by the Fathers and the most difficult to see in ourselves. Other sins announce themselves by the shame that follows them. Pride announces itself by a warmth of self-satisfaction that, at the time, feels like virtue.

“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” James 4:6, NKJV

The servant who preaches well, teaches well, organizes well, is in daily danger of mistaking the Lord's gift for his own quality. The warning signs are small and familiar: the quiet satisfaction when our class is praised; the irritation when another servant is praised instead; the reluctance to receive correction from someone less experienced; the growing conviction that the ministry could not easily do without us.

John Climacus has a paragraph that should hang over every servant's door:

“Pride is the denial of God, an invention of the devil, the despising of men. It is the mother of condemnation, the offspring of praises, a sign of barrenness. It is a flight from the help of God, the harbinger of madness, the cause of falls. Where a fall hath overtaken a man, there pride had taken up its abode beforehand; for the falling is but its outward sign.” St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 23

The antidote is not self-loathing; it is the deliberate and repeated returning of credit to its true Owner. After every small victory in the work, a short sentence under the breath — 'Yours, Lord, not mine' — is one of the simplest disciplines a servant can keep.

Spiritual Fatigue

A less dramatic but nearly as dangerous peril is simple fatigue — the slow erosion of the inner life by the very activity of the outer life. The Greek Fathers have a word for this: akedia, sometimes translated 'spiritual sloth,' sometimes 'listlessness.' It is the servant's soul grown quietly flat. The prayers are still said, but they have gone thin. The liturgy is still attended, but the heart watches it from a distance. The gifts are still given, but something in the giver has gone dry.

Our Lord Himself attended to the fatigue of His disciples:

“And He said to them, 'Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.' For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.” Mark 6:31, NKJV

Rest, in His economy, is not lazy; it is pastoral. A servant who has not learned to step back regularly — for a walk, for a quiet hour with the Gospel, for a day of sabbath, for a weekend retreat once or twice a year — will eventually give his parish a tired, thin version of the grace that was meant to pass through him.

Isaac the Syrian writes with great gentleness on this:

“Do not despise thyself when thy soul hath grown weary. A tired soul is not yet a fallen soul; it is only a soul that hath forgotten for a moment the sweetness of her Lord. Withdraw a little, remember Him, and return. The field will be there, and the labor, and the grace to carry both.” St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies LXIV

Comparison and Competition

A danger that often surprises new servants is the quiet acidity of comparison. We begin serving alongside brothers and sisters we love. Over time, however, we begin to notice who is noticed more, who speaks better, whose class grows faster, whose gifts are praised in meetings. Comparison rarely announces itself; it shows up as a small reluctance to rejoice in another's success, or a small eagerness to point out another's mistake, or a private discouragement when we feel we are falling behind.

Our Lord, speaking to Peter about the other beloved disciple, says words that belong to every servant:

“Jesus said to him, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.'” John 21:22, NKJV

'You follow Me.' The servant who follows the Lord does not have the bandwidth to also measure himself against his peers. Each of us is called by name. The work the Lord is doing in another is not our business, except to thank Him for it. The work He is doing in us is different, particular, and enough.

Paul puts the same thought more bluntly to the Corinthians:

“For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.” 2 Corinthians 10:12, NKJV

Confusing Our Work with His Work

A subtler danger arises when a servant has labored in a ministry for many years. The ministry begins to feel, without our quite noticing, like ours. Our opinions about it sharpen. Our sense of ownership deepens. We find it difficult to watch someone else do it differently, or to let go of it when the Lord is moving us elsewhere. The ministry is no longer an offering placed in His hand; it has become a small kingdom that bears our name.

The Baptist, who had more reason than most to feel ownership of his own ministry, gives us the sentence we must keep saying:

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” John 3:30, NKJV

Every servant eventually reaches a moment in which the Lord asks for a step back — a change of role, a handoff to a younger servant, a simple retirement from a visible position. How we handle that moment reveals whether we had been serving the Lord or building a small empire in His name. A servant who can put down a work with open hands has not failed; he has completed the secret purpose of every servant's life, which is that the Lord should grow and we should grow smaller.

The Danger of Hollow Words

Because so much of our service involves speaking — teaching, counseling, praying aloud — the servant faces a specific danger that does not touch most other vocations: the danger of saying true things we have stopped meaning. Over time, a servant can acquire a vocabulary of piety that runs on its own, a pulpit ease that outpaces his own inner life. The words continue to bless others — the Lord is merciful — but they no longer nourish the speaker, and eventually that lack begins to be felt.

“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.” Matthew 15:8, NKJV

The remedy is not to stop speaking; it is to keep our speech rooted. A short sentence said slowly and meant fully does more, for both the hearer and the speaker, than a paragraph of fluent piety. Every servant ought, once in a while, to write out a phrase he has said a thousand times — 'Lord, have mercy,' or 'into Your hands I commend my spirit' — and sit quietly with it until it begins to be true in him again.

Chrysostom, who knew the danger of the preacher's fluency better than most, writes:

“Let not thy tongue outrun thy heart. For the tongue, being a light member, can speak what the heart hath not yet received; and when it doth so often enough, the heart groweth deaf to its own words. Let us therefore pause, even in preaching, and ask whether what we are saying is still breathed in us, and not only spoken.” St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood V.8 (paraphrased)

The Safeguards the Lord Has Given

The Church does not leave us to face these dangers alone. She has placed around every servant a set of safeguards as old as the apostles.

The first is a father of confession. A servant without a regular father of confession is exposed in a way that no amount of reading can protect. The eye of another, honest and loving, catches what we cannot catch in ourselves. A short monthly confession is one of the quiet pillars of a long service.

The second is a rule of prayer. The daily rhythm of prayer — morning, noon, evening, and the hour before sleep — is not a decoration; it is a railing that keeps us from slipping when the ground is wet.

The third is the sacramental life. Regular communion, when the conscience is clear, is the renewing of our union with the incarnate Lord. A servant who communes often is a servant who is being daily re-rooted in the ground of his own ministry.

The fourth is a small circle of brothers or sisters who know us. Not a committee; just two or three honest friends who will ask the direct question when they sense drift. Almost every serious falling of a servant has happened in the absence of such friends.

The fifth is sabbath. A day a week when the ministry pauses, the phone rests, the family is attended to, the body is fed, and the soul is not working. The Lord who made the week is wiser than our

enthusiasm. Sabbath is one of the great preventives of pride, fatigue, comparison, and hollow speech all at once.

May the Lord who has called us into the dangers of His service keep us also in its mercies. May He guard our hearts from the pride that whispers the gift is ours, the fatigue that lets the inner life grow thin, the comparison that poisons our joy in our brothers, the confusion that makes His work begin to feel like ours, and the hollow speech that lets our mouths outrun our hearts. May He give us the safeguards the Church has prepared — a father of confession, a rule of prayer, the Holy Mysteries, faithful friends, and the weekly gift of rest. And may every servant among us finish the race not only having labored but having been kept.

Review Questions

1. Paul warns that 'he who thinks he stands' is most in danger of falling. Where in our current service might the very length of our faithfulness have made us less vigilant than we ought to be?
2. Pride announces itself as the warmth of self-satisfaction rather than as shame. What recent 'warm' moment might, in honesty, have been the beginning of pride asking to be fed?
3. Akeidia is the soul grown quietly flat beneath the continuing labor. Are we showing any signs of this, and what small rest has the Lord been asking us to take that we have been postponing?
4. Comparison is a slow acid on the joy of service. Which servant's visibility, gift, or fruitfulness have we been measuring ourselves against, and what would it mean this week to lay that measurement down?
5. The Baptist said, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' Where in our own ministry is the Lord beginning, perhaps, to ask for a handoff, a step back, or a change of role?
6. The danger of hollow words: where in our speech have we been repeating a piety that has gone a little cold? What one phrase could we sit with this week until it becomes true in us again?
7. Of the five safeguards named (father of confession, rule of prayer, the Holy Mysteries, honest friends, sabbath), which one is most solid in our life, and which one most needs restoring?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

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- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

CHAPTER

2.2 CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN SERVICE

Time Management

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

For the servant, time is not a neutral resource to be optimized. Time is the medium in which the Lord has chosen to work out our salvation and the salvation of those we serve. Every hour given to us is an hour the Father has measured out with care. How we handle that measure — what we keep, what we give away, what we let slip through our fingers in distraction — is itself a spiritual question. This lesson looks at time management not as a productivity technique borrowed from the business world, but as a discipline of love. We will examine what Scripture and the Fathers say about the shape of a Christian day, the place of priorities, the sickness of hurry, the gift of rest, and the quiet practices that let a servant come to the end of his week with both the work done and the soul kept.

Time as a Gift

The Psalmist gives us a posture toward time that most modern habits have forgotten.

“So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Psalm 90:12, NKJV

Notice that the Psalmist does not ask for more days. He asks to be taught how to count the ones he has. The presupposition is that our days are finite and therefore precious — that they are given, not earned, and that a wise heart is grown in the honest recognition of this.

St. Paul carries the same thought into the life of the Christian community:

“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” Ephesians 5:15–16, NKJV

'Redeeming the time' — the Greek word *exagorazomai* means to buy back, to purchase out of the market. In a world whose hours are easily spent on small and empty things, the servant is asked to redeem them, to buy them back for the kingdom, one by one.

St. Basil writes with warmth on this:

“The Lord hath given us the same measure of time that He gave the prophets and martyrs and saints. They filled their hours with Him; we fill ours with little things and complain of shortness. Let us therefore examine, not how many our hours are, but what we are giving them to.” St. Basil the Great, On the Hexameron 1.2 (paraphrased)

The Shape of a Christian Day

The Church, across twenty centuries, has handed to us a simple shape for the day. Morning prayer to consecrate the day to the Lord; short prayers at the hours or before meals to remember Him mid-stream; evening prayer to hand the day back to Him before rest; and a compline or before-sleep prayer to entrust our soul to Him through the night. This rhythm is not ornamental. It gives a day its backbone. The work of the hours fits around it, not the other way around.

“Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice.” Psalm 55:17, NKJV

A servant who does not keep a minimum rhythm of prayer will find that the demands of the day quickly dictate the day's meaning. A servant who keeps even a short rhythm — five minutes in the morning, a sentence before lunch, five minutes in the evening — will find that the Lord remains, perceptibly, the author of the day's events.

Within this rhythm, work is not the enemy of prayer. St. Paul's 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5:17) is lived out by servants who have learned to pray in the car, at the counter, between classes, during the washing of dishes. The prayer of the heart — a short and repeatable sentence, such as the Jesus Prayer — is the great gift the Church has given for this very purpose. It turns the ordinary minutes of a day into a conversation.

Priorities — The First Discipline

Time management is almost always, at root, a question of priorities. Two people may have the same twenty-four hours, and one will finish the day at peace and the other exhausted and behind, simply because the first put first things first.

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” Matthew 6:33, NKJV

Our Lord's word is not a promise of magical efficiency. It is a statement of order. When the kingdom is sought first, the other necessities fall into their right place. When the other necessities are sought first, the kingdom struggles to find any place at all.

For a servant, the concrete shape of this is well known, though rarely practiced with discipline: prayer before meetings, Scripture before screens, family before ministry, rest before collapse. A servant who has decided, in advance, what his first things are, does not need to decide again at every fork in the day. The decisions have already been made.

Our Lord Himself kept this order. 'Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed' (Mark 1:35). The One whose day included the healing of crowds began the day with the Father. If He needed the solitary place, how much more do we.

The Sickness of Hurry

There is a particular sickness of our age that a servant must learn to resist: hurry. Hurry is not the same as diligence. A servant can be diligent and unhurried; he can also be frantic and undone. Hurry is the state in which we move through the hours without attending to them, driven by an inner pressure that treats every task as a thing to be finished so we can get to the next thing to be finished.

“Be still, and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10, NKJV

Stillness is the opposite of hurry. It is not inactivity; it is a quality of presence in whatever we are doing. A servant who has learned stillness can speak to a grieving mother without scanning the room for the next appointment; can teach a slow student without sighing; can sit with the dying without calculating the clock.

The desert Fathers had a short and famous prescription for the hurry of the soul:

“Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.” Abba Moses,
Apophthegmata Patrum (Sayings of the Desert Fathers)

Our 'cell' today is the quiet corner of a room, the car turned off for five extra minutes before we go into the house, the early morning before the phone wakes up. These small cells teach us, every day, the grammar of unhurried presence.

The Gift of Sabbath

One of the most countercultural disciplines of time a servant can keep is sabbath — a weekly day on which the work pauses. This is not optional refinement; it is one of the ten commandments, given to us before we had asked for it.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work.” Exodus 20:8–10, NKJV

The Christian Church has moved the celebration to the Lord's Day, the day of the Resurrection, but the wisdom of a rest-filled day every seven has remained. A servant who works seven days a week is not more spiritual; he is usually exhausted, subtly proud (assuming his absence would harm the work), and gradually estranged from his own family.

Sabbath is a confession of trust. When we stop working for a day, we are quietly saying that the world does not depend on us, that our Father is awake even while we rest, and that the ministry will still be there on Monday. Every weekly sabbath is a small rehearsal for the final rest.

For most servants, a practical sabbath looks like this: one day a week with no work email, no ministry planning, no classes, no pastoral visits unless there is a genuine crisis. Instead: long liturgy, a shared meal, time with family, a walk, a nap, a book read for love. It is not wasted time. It is the time the Lord gives back to us what the week has taken.

Practical Habits of the Well-Kept Hour

A few practical habits, gathered from the experience of many servants, are worth naming.

First, plan the week on Sunday evening. A quiet fifteen minutes with the calendar, asking where the Lord is placing His claims on the coming week, saves hours of reactive scrambling later. A servant who does not plan is planned upon.

Second, protect the first hour of the day for prayer and Scripture. Emails and messages will rush to fill it if we let them. They can wait an hour. The Lord, who was there first, should have what is first.

Third, say yes carefully and no kindly. An over-committed servant eventually serves no one well. Most good servants need to learn to say, 'I would love to, but I can't take this on right now.' This is not unspiritual; it is honest.

Fourth, put margins around the hard things. Do not schedule a difficult pastoral visit immediately before a class; give ourselves the space to arrive as a whole person, not as someone still processing the last hour.

Fifth, end the day deliberately. A short prayer at bedtime, naming the day's gifts and failures, hands the day back to the Lord and frees the mind for rest. A servant who cannot sleep often has not yet handed the day back.

Sixth, take short seasons of retreat. Once or twice a year, two or three days at a monastery or in a quiet house, with the phone off and the Gospel open, are worth more than many weeks of tired service.

May the Lord who made the evening and the morning, the week and the year, teach us to number our days. May He deliver us from the hurry that looks like holiness, from the over-commitment that empties rather than gives, and from the quiet idolatry that makes our ministry seem to depend on us. May He bless the small rhythms by which servants have always been kept — morning and evening prayer, the weekly sabbath, the annual retreat, the thoughtful Sunday-evening look at the week. And may we come to the end of our days having redeemed them, hour by hour, for the kingdom whose time is not measured in minutes but in love.

Review Questions

1. Psalm 90 asks the Lord to teach us to 'number our days.' What does it mean, concretely, for a servant to count rather than simply spend his hours?
2. St. Paul writes of 'redeeming the time.' Looking honestly at yesterday, which hours were redeemed for the kingdom, and which ones slipped away?
3. The Church gives us a simple shape of morning, midday, and evening prayer. What would a minimum rhythm look like in our current schedule, and where is it currently frayed?
4. Our Lord Himself sought a solitary place before daylight. What 'first hour' of our own day is most easily taken by other demands, and what small change could protect it?
5. Hurry is not the same as diligence. Where in our week do we move without attending, and what would it look like to exchange hurry for stillness in that place?

6. Sabbath is a weekly confession that the world does not depend on us. Do we keep a genuine day of rest, and if not, what is one small step toward beginning?
7. Of the practical habits named (weekly planning, protected first hour, careful yes/no, margins around hard things, deliberate end-of-day, annual retreat), which one is most needed in our life right now?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
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- Fr. Thomas Hopko, The Orthodox Faith, Vol. IV (on the rhythms of Christian prayer).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way.

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Lesson Notes

The Christian American

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Many of the servants this curriculum is written for live as Orthodox Christians in a country that is not ancestrally Orthodox, and whose cultural air is shaped by values that sometimes agree with the Gospel and sometimes quietly oppose it. This lesson is about the particular task of being faithful to Christ in the American setting — how to love our country without absolutizing it, how to use its freedoms without being shaped by its assumptions, how to raise Orthodox children in a pluralistic world, and how to witness to a Gospel that is older than any nation and larger than any political moment. The Fathers spoke to their own cultures with the same question. We draw on their wisdom and on the Scriptures' long experience of the people of God living as pilgrims among many nations.

Citizens of Two Kingdoms

The New Testament gives us a clear posture toward earthly citizenship. The Christian is a citizen of the country where he lives, and he is also — more deeply, more ultimately — a citizen of a kingdom whose King is Christ.

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Philippians 3:20, NKJV

St. Paul wrote this as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:27–28), using the privileges of Rome when they served the Gospel, and yet never placing his ultimate hope in Rome. He is our model. We do not despise the country where the Lord has placed us. We honor its good, obey its just laws, pray for its leaders, and serve our neighbors in it. And we do not confuse any earthly city with the eternal one.

The Epistle to Diognetus, one of the most beautiful writings of the early Church, captures this double citizenship in a single paragraph:

“Christians dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers... They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven.” Epistle to Diognetus V

That sentence is, word for word, a description of the Christian American. At home here; a stranger here. Loving this country; not finally belonging to it.

Honoring the Country

Scripture speaks with unusual clarity about our duty to the earthly order. Paul, writing under an emperor far from friendly to the Church, still instructs:

“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.” Romans 13:1, NKJV

This is not a baptism of every policy of every administration. It is the recognition that ordered civic life is itself a gift of God, and that Christians are to be good and honorable participants in it. We pay our taxes. We vote thoughtfully. We serve on juries. We keep the laws. We are not subversive or cynical citizens; we are among the best our country has.

Jeremiah, writing to Israel in Babylonian exile, gives us the most useful sentence for Christians living in any country to which their deepest loyalty does not belong:

“And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace.” Jeremiah 29:7, NKJV

Seek the peace of the city. Pray for it. Do it honest good. That is the posture of the Christian American in every generation, regardless of who holds office.

Love Without Absolutizing

There is a particular temptation in any country — and it is no less present in America — to baptize one's national story as though it were the Gospel's own. Christians have fallen into this in every age. The remedy is not cynicism about our country but a clear-eyed love that knows the difference between the nation and the kingdom.

The apostles refused, firmly but courteously, to confuse the two. When the Sanhedrin commanded them to stop preaching, Peter and John answered:

“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” Acts 4:19–20, NKJV

This is the sentence every Christian must be ready to speak, in whatever country he serves, whenever the country's demands come into direct conflict with the Lord's. Such moments are, for most of us, rare. When they come, though, they come with clarity.

In the daily life of a parish, the danger is usually subtler: not persecution, but a slow adoption of the culture's reflexes. The Christian American must learn to recognize when a political position is being dressed in Gospel language that does not actually fit it, and when a Gospel position is being softened to fit a political coalition we happen to favor. The Gospel is neither of the left nor of the right; it is older than the American founding and longer than any election cycle.

St. Augustine, who wrote *The City of God* as the Roman Empire fell around him, gives us a sentence to keep near:

“Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The earthly city glories in herself; the heavenly, in the Lord.” St. Augustine, The City of God XIV.28

Freedom and Its Discipline

America's most famous gift to her citizens is freedom, and the Christian American should be honestly grateful for it. Freedom of religion in particular has allowed our Church to worship, teach, build, and evangelize with a latitude our ancestors in many lands would have considered miraculous. We do not take this lightly. We use it gratefully.

But the Christian understanding of freedom is not the same as the cultural understanding of freedom. The culture tends to define freedom as the absence of constraint — 'I can do whatever I want.' The Scripture defines freedom as the presence of the right capacity — the ability, given by grace, to do what is actually good.

“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Galatians 5:13, NKJV

A Christian American is therefore a free citizen in two senses that must not be confused. He has political freedoms from his country, which he uses gratefully. He has evangelical freedom in Christ, which is the freedom to love, to serve, to tell the truth, to forgive, to be patient. The second is the deeper, the permanent, and the one for which he finally lives.

One practical outcome of this double understanding: the Christian American exercises his political freedoms with a restraint that the culture often does not understand. Not every thing he is permitted to do is a thing he should do. His speech is gentled by love. His consumption is bounded by stewardship. His politics are softened by prayer for those he disagrees with. This is not weakness; it is the freedom of a son of God, living in the meantime.

Raising Children as Christian Americans

For parents and teachers, a central pastoral question is how to raise children who are truly Orthodox and truly rooted in this country without being assimilated out of the faith. This has been the immigrant Orthodox experience for more than a century, and it remains the daily work of many of our families.

A few wisdoms have come down from those who have done this well. First, the home is the first church. The icon corner, the evening prayer, the fast days observed together, the feast days celebrated with joy — these give a child an Orthodox taste for life long before he can articulate doctrine. Second, the parish must be non-negotiable. A child who attends liturgy reliably, sings in the choir, serves at the altar, or teaches younger children grows up knowing where his home is. Third, Orthodox friendships matter. A child who has a circle of Orthodox peers with whom he talks about faith will find it much easier, in college and beyond, to remain faithful. Fourth, parents must model the struggle rather than

pretend they have arrived. A child who sees his parents praying, confessing, forgiving each other, and continuing to serve through difficulty learns what adult faith actually looks like.

“And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.” Ephesians 6:4, NKJV

It is important also to be patient with the questions the culture will put to our children. We should not be surprised when our children ask hard questions. We should welcome them. A home where difficult questions can be asked without fear is a home where the Lord can answer them. A home where such questions are met with alarm often drives the young believer to ask them somewhere else.

Witnessing in a Pluralistic World

The Christian American lives and works alongside people of many faiths and no faith. This is, from one angle, the great mission opportunity of our time. The ancient Christian way of witness is not argument but life.

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:16, NKJV

A Christian colleague who is honest in his work, gentle in his speech, faithful to his spouse, generous with his time, and quietly unembarrassed about his faith will, over the course of years, be noticed. Some will come to ask. For those who ask, the Scripture has a simple counsel:

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.” 1 Peter 3:15, NKJV

'With meekness and fear.' Our witness is never combative; it is always warm, always humble, always rooted in a visible life.

A second way we witness is by hospitality. Our tables, our homes, our parishes should be places where the stranger is welcomed without first being interrogated about his beliefs. Hospitality is one of the oldest evangelical instruments the Church has, and it remains, in our busy and divided country, one of the most powerful.

May the Lord who has placed each of us in a particular country, in a particular generation, teach us to live in America as Christians first and as Americans gratefully second. May He preserve us from the confusion of the nation with the kingdom, and from the cynicism that refuses to love our country because it is not the kingdom. May He give us speech that is honest and gentle, freedom that serves rather than serves itself, homes that pass the faith on whole to our children, and hospitality wide enough to make room for the stranger. And may every servant among us finish his days having sought the peace of the city and yet having never forgotten that his citizenship is in heaven.

Review Questions

1. The Epistle to Diognetus describes Christians as citizens of every country and strangers in every country at once. How does this double citizenship show up concretely in our own life as Christian Americans?
2. Jeremiah told the exiles to 'seek the peace of the city.' What is one specific way we could do that this year in our workplace, our neighborhood, or our civic life?
3. Where, in the last political season, did we notice the temptation to dress a political position in Gospel language, or to soften a Gospel position to fit a political one? What did that teach us?
4. The cultural definition of freedom is the absence of constraint; the Christian definition is the presence of the capacity to do what is good. Where is that distinction currently asking something of us?
5. For parents and teachers: of the four wisdoms named (home as first church, non-negotiable parish, Orthodox friendships, modeling the struggle), which one is most solid in our family, and which most needs attention?
6. 1 Peter 3:15 asks us to give an answer 'with meekness and fear.' What tone do our conversations about faith currently have, and what would it look like to soften them without softening the Gospel?
7. Hospitality is one of the oldest evangelical instruments. Whom could we welcome to our table in the next month — not as an evangelistic project, but simply as a person the Lord is bringing near?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

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Lesson Notes

The Servant and Social Media

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Every generation of Christians has had to think carefully about its new technologies — scrolls, codices, printing presses, radio, television. In our generation, the technology most intimately shaping souls is the handheld, always-connected, algorithmically curated social platform. A servant cannot simply ignore it: it is where many of the people we serve already live, and where many temptations and opportunities now travel. But a servant cannot simply immerse himself in it either: it is built on incentives that, left unexamined, work quietly against the inner life the Gospel asks of us. This lesson looks soberly at what social media is, what it does to the soul if used without thought, how the servant may use it without being used by it, and when to step away altogether. We aim not at rules but at wisdom — the wisdom of a servant who keeps his heart clear in a noisy age.

What Social Media Is

Let us begin by naming what social media actually is, because the word can hide its real shape. A social platform is a business built to hold our attention for as long as possible, because its revenue is a function of attention sold to advertisers. The content is not selected for our spiritual good; it is selected to keep us scrolling. The incentives that shape the platform are not neutral.

This is not, by itself, a condemnation. The printing press also had commercial incentives and still produced Bibles. The servant's task is not to flee every commercial medium but to use it with his eyes open. A servant who does not understand how a tool is built cannot wield it wisely; he will simply be wielded by it.

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” Matthew 10:16, NKJV

'Wise as serpents' is our Lord's own instruction for a servant entering a new environment. The serpent is not naive. He knows the terrain before he moves through it. A Christian entering social media should know its terrain: that its algorithms reward outrage, that its metrics measure only what can be counted, that its endless feed is engineered to feel endless, that its visible life is curated and therefore not honest.

What It Does to the Soul

Sustained, unexamined use of social media tends to do several specific things to the human soul. The Fathers would have recognized each of them.

First, it fragments attention. The servant's soul needs long hours of unbroken attending — to Scripture, to prayer, to a person in front of him. A steady diet of thirty-second videos and micro-reactions trains

the soul into a shorter attention span, and that shorter span then shows up in our prayer, our reading, our conversation. 'Be still, and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:10) becomes difficult to obey when stillness itself has grown unfamiliar.

Second, it cultivates comparison. Every social feed is a parade of other people's highlights set against our own ordinary day. The result, over time, is a quiet discontent with our actual life, our actual family, our actual parish. Comparison, as the previous lesson noted, is acid to the servant's joy.

Third, it encourages a curated self. We learn to present the version of us that performs well. This is not merely harmless presentation; it is the beginning of a small doubleness that the Scriptures call by an ancient name.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.” Matthew 23:27, NKJV

The servant whose online self is significantly more holy, witty, or successful than his actual self is in spiritual danger, because the platform rewards the gap.

Fourth, it ignites anger. Algorithms have learned that outrage is more engaging than gratitude, and they feed us accordingly. A servant who has spent an hour in the usual feed is often a more agitated, less gracious servant than he was an hour before. The Scripture is blunt:

“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.” Ephesians 4:31, NKJV

Fifth, it erodes privacy and contemplation. The old spiritual life was made of a great deal of unshared silence: prayers said in private, thoughts held without broadcasting, consolations kept close. A culture that asks us to share constantly trains us out of this interior life. The soul that cannot be alone with God has lost something precious.

Chastity of the Mind

A specific danger worth naming is the way social media trains the mind to graze on images and words without discernment. The Fathers called this lack of guard over the heart *akrasia* — a kind of incontinence of attention. The ancient discipline of *nepsis*, watchfulness, is the opposite.

“Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.” Proverbs 4:23, NKJV

A servant who scrolls without attending is leaving the door of his heart open to everything the algorithm brings. A servant who opens a platform with a specific purpose — to answer a message, to post a Scripture, to see a specific piece of news — and then closes it, is exercising *nepsis*. The difference is not small. It is the difference between a disciple who guards his heart and one who merely allows it to be shaped by whatever passes through.

This extends particularly to the images the platforms freely surface. The servant must be vigilant about what his eyes take in. A temptation that a generation ago required deliberate effort to find now arrives uninvited in the feed. There is no shame in setting strong filters, deleting an app for a season, or turning the phone off at certain hours. These are not weaknesses; they are the intelligent disciplines of a servant who knows himself.

St. Isaac the Syrian gave a sentence long before phones existed that fits this moment exactly:

“Watch over thine eyes as over two lamps in thy temple. What they see long, the heart eateth at length, and the taste of it changeth thee whether thou wouldst or no.” St.

Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies XXIV (paraphrased)

How the Servant May Use It Well

None of this should lead us to a blanket condemnation. The Lord is present in every field of labor, and servants in our time have done real good through thoughtful use of these tools: a sermon shared with someone far from a church, a Scripture posted at the right hour, a message of consolation sent to a grieving friend, a group chat that holds a community together across miles.

The wisdom is not avoidance but discipline. A few concrete habits help.

First, use it with a purpose and leave. Opening a platform should feel like entering a tool shed — we go in to pick up a particular tool, and we come out when the task is done. Aimless scrolling is the habit the platforms most reward and we should most resist.

Second, keep the morning. The first thirty minutes of the day set the soul's posture. A servant whose first look of the day is at his phone has ceded those minutes to whatever the feed decided was important. A servant whose first look is at the icon corner has placed his day, first, in the Lord's hand.

Third, keep the night. The last hour before sleep shapes the dreams and the next morning's mood. Screens in the bedroom are the most common small poison of the servant's sleep. Charge the phone in the kitchen; keep a physical book by the bed.

Fourth, observe a weekly sabbath from social media. The whole Lord's Day, from Saturday night to Sunday evening, with the apps off. Many servants who have done this report that it is, over time, the single most restoring discipline they keep.

Fifth, speak online as we would speak in a cathedral. We are always, on social media, in a room where many people can hear us, including people who do not know the Lord. Would we say this, this way, from the solea? If not, we do not say it here either.

Sixth, when a topic makes us angry, wait twenty-four hours before posting. The Scripture's 'let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath' (James 1:19) was written for one-to-one conversation; it applies tenfold to one-to-many platforms.

Seventh, do not outsource formation. Whatever we learn online is no substitute for the Scripture, the liturgy, the Fathers, and our spiritual father. Social media can give us a paragraph; it cannot give us a foundation.

When to Step Away

There are seasons, and there are some servants, for whom the most faithful response to social media is simply to step away from it. This is not defeat. It is a wise reading of ourselves. Not every tool that works for our brother works for us, and there is no shame in admitting that a particular platform is harder for us to keep clean than it is for others.

Signs that a longer break or a total departure may be needed: our prayer life has thinned noticeably since we became active on the platform; our anger is more easily lit than it used to be; we find ourselves returning compulsively, even when we do not want to; our spouse or confessor has raised a concern more than once; we have posted things in the last month we would be ashamed to read aloud in church.

“If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.” Matthew 5:30, NKJV

Our Lord's language is intentionally strong. He is telling us that no digital good is worth the soul. A servant who steps away from a platform for a year, or forever, has not failed; he has simply chosen the deeper good.

The Great Sobriety

The ancient word for the virtue a servant needs in every technological age is sobriety — *nepsis* in the Greek, vigilance. It is the habit of a mind awake to its own motions, unwilling to be led into small slaveries by small conveniences.

“Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.” 1 Thessalonians 5:6, NKJV

Sobriety is not severity. It does not forbid enjoyment; it keeps enjoyment in its right place. A sober servant can use a phone and not be used by it; can post a Scripture and then close the app; can read a thread and remain unagitated; can love the persons on the screen without confusing them with the flesh-and-blood neighbor at his door.

The neighbor at the door is, in the end, the recurring test. If our online life is drawing us toward more patient, more present, more prayerful love of the actual people the Lord has placed in our path, it is serving us. If it is quietly pulling us away from them, it is not.

May the Lord who has placed us in this noisy generation keep our hearts at rest in Him. May He give us the wisdom of serpents and the harmlessness of doves in every feed and every thread. May He guard our eyes from what would darken them, our tongues from what would harm others and ourselves, our

attention from what would fragment it, and our prayer life from what would thin it out. May He give us the courage to step away when we must, the discipline to stay when it serves, and the steady grace to look up from every screen and find, still, the beloved face of the neighbor in front of us. To Him be the glory, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Review Questions

1. Social platforms are built to hold attention for commercial reasons. How does recognizing this shape the way we choose to enter, spend time on, and leave these tools?
2. Of the five effects named (fragmented attention, comparison, a curated self, kindled anger, eroded contemplation), which is most at work in us, and how have we begun to see it?
3. Nepsis — watchfulness — asks us to notice what we are letting into our heart. What is one habit of intentional watchfulness we could add to our phone use this week?
4. The servant speaks online as he would speak in the cathedral. Looking at our last ten posts, are any of them ones we would not say from the solea?
5. Of the seven disciplines named (purposeful use, protected morning, protected night, weekly sabbath, cathedral-speech, twenty-four-hour rule, no outsourcing of formation), which is already in place, and which is the next one to establish?
6. Are any of the signs of a needed step-away present in our life (thinned prayer, easier anger, compulsive return, concerns raised by spouse or confessor, posts we would be ashamed to read aloud)?
7. The recurring test is the neighbor at the door. Is our online life currently drawing us toward more patient love of the people physically in our path, or away from them?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston).
- The *Philokalia*, especially selections on nepsis (watchfulness) from St. Hesychios the Priest and St. Philotheos of Sinai.
- St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues* (on the tongue and public speech).
- Fr. Thomas Hopko, *55 Maxims for the Christian Life* (wisdom for modern disciples).

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

Unit 3

Sacrifice and Fruitfulness

Unit 3 stands at the end of the curriculum and gathers its whole weight. If Unit 1 laid the foundation of who the servant is, and Unit 2 faced the labor and the challenges of the work, Unit 3 asks the final questions: what does a servant's life of sacrifice actually look like, and what is the fruit it bears in the Lord's economy? The Lord who asks us to go the second mile has walked it first. The Lord who asks us to feed His sheep has fed us with His own Body. The Lord who asks us to be humble has taken the towel and washed our feet. And the fruit He promises — faith, victory, and the life of grace by which Christ Himself is formed in us — is in the end only Himself, poured through us into the lives of those we serve.

CHAPTER

3.1 SACRIFICE IN SERVICE

The Gospel of the Second Mile

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Tucked inside the Sermon on the Mount is a single image our Lord drew from the streets of occupied Palestine: a Roman soldier compelling a Jewish passerby to carry his pack for one mile. The law of the occupiers required the first mile. Our Lord, in a sentence that must have astonished His first hearers, asked for a second. 'Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two' (Matthew 5:41). The second mile is the gift no one can demand, the step no one is forced to take, the yard given freely after the obligation has been met. It is not the whole of the Christian life, but it is the hinge between duty and love. This lesson walks slowly through that second mile — what it meant on the first day it was spoken, what it asks of the servant now, the saints whose lives embodied it, and the quiet way a second-mile servant changes the weather of a parish.

The First Hearers

To understand our Lord's sentence we must first hear it as His first hearers did. In first-century Palestine a Roman soldier had the legal right to impress any able-bodied man into carrying his pack for a single Roman mile — about fifteen hundred paces. The law was specific about the distance because the distance was the limit of the humiliation. No occupier could demand more. The pressed man could drop the pack at the milestone and walk away.

This is the world into which our Lord speaks:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two." Matthew 5:38–41, NKJV

The crowd on the hillside would have heard the shock of it. The Lord was not telling them to endure the occupation more grimly; He was telling them to outflank it with a love that the occupier could not predict and could not command. One mile was required; two was given. The second mile changes the whole meaning of the first. It is no longer the fruit of coercion; it has become a gift.

Beyond the Law

The second mile is one instance of a wider pattern running through the whole Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord, again and again, takes a good law and asks for a righteousness that exceeds it.

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:20, NKJV

The key word is exceed. The scribes and Pharisees were not wrong about the law; they were simply not generous with it. Our Lord asks for a life that walks past the boundary of what is required into the open country of what is given. Do not murder, yes — and do not hate your brother in your heart. Do not commit adultery, yes — and do not linger on the lust. Return what is owed, yes — and add to it a gift no one asked for.

Every one of these movements has the same shape as the second mile. There is a first mile of obedience, which is good and necessary. And there is a second mile of love, which is where the Gospel actually begins to shine.

The First Mile Is Not Despised

It is easy, in praising the second mile, to speak as though the first were unimportant. This would be a serious misreading. The first mile — the keeping of the commandments, the meeting of our obligations, the doing of what is required — is the foundation on which the second is built. A servant who has not learned to show up for the first mile cannot honestly offer the second.

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” Matthew 5:17, NKJV

The runner who has never trained cannot sprint the last quarter. The servant who has not learned to come to liturgy on time, to keep his promises, to finish what he began — that servant is in no position to speak of going beyond. The second mile is not a shortcut around the first; it is the overflow of a soul that has already learned to walk the first with honor.

This ordering is pastorally important. When a servant feels overwhelmed by the thought of the second mile, the quiet wisdom is often this: go back and walk the first well. The second follows.

What the Second Mile Looks Like

In the concrete life of a servant, the second mile takes many ordinary shapes. It is often small, unphotographed, and uncelebrated.

In the classroom, the first mile is teaching the lesson well. The second is noticing the child who stayed behind, asking the question no one else thought to ask, or simply sitting a few extra minutes with the one who came in weary. The first mile is required of us; the second is a gift the Lord remembers.

In hospitality, the first mile is welcoming the people we know. The second is seeking out the one we do not know, walking across the hall to introduce ourselves, and inviting the new family to our table — even when our own week is full.

In forgiveness, the first mile is refusing to strike back when we have been wounded. The second is praying for the one who wounded us, by name, until the bitterness loosens and the prayer is honest.

In service, the first mile is doing the task we signed up for. The second is staying to help clean up, or volunteering for the quiet work no one wants. The servants who keep a parish going over the long decades are almost always second-mile servants — the ones who arrived early, stayed late, and never made much noise about either.

In money and time, the first mile is meeting our obligations. The second is giving beyond what is asked, without being thanked, and without letting the left hand know what the right is doing (Matthew 6:3).

None of this is heroic in the dramatic sense. It is, rather, the quiet thousand small decisions by which a life is slowly given away.

The Saints and the Second Mile

The saints are those who made the second mile the habitual shape of their lives. Their stories have come down to us precisely because they astonished their own generations.

Abba Bessarion, one of the desert Fathers, was walking through a village on a cold winter day when he came across the body of a dead man. Without hesitation he took off his own cloak and covered the corpse. A little further on, he met a shivering poor man and gave him his tunic as well. When a Roman soldier asked who had stripped him, the saint simply held up the Gospel book in his hand. Another day, meeting a beggar and having nothing else to give, he sold the Gospel itself and gave the money away. Asked later where his book was, he answered plainly that he had sold the Book in obedience to the Book.

Father Bishoy Kamel, a modern priest who reposed young in 1979, gave away the food from his own table after the late Paschal services to anyone who still stood in need. On one night when two people came to him in crisis — a young woman without resources and a college student unable to pay his registration — Fr. Bishoy had nothing in his hand. He asked them both for patience, and within the hour a little girl appeared at his door with an envelope containing exactly what was needed for both, saying only, 'My mother, Mary, sends this to you.' The second mile, when offered in simplicity, tends to be met.

These are not ornaments of the tradition. They are its central line. The Lord who told us to go the second mile walked it first, the whole road from heaven into the manger, from the manger to the cross, and from the cross down into death itself. The second mile is not a strange extra; it is the shape of His love.

Love Covers

The second mile has its natural home in love, and the Scriptures describe this love with a particular set of capacities.

“And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins.” 1 Peter 4:8, NKJV

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.” 1 John 4:18, NKJV

“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil... Love never fails.” 1 Corinthians 13:4–5, 8, NKJV

A servant whose love has grown into the second mile covers the small sins of his brothers rather than broadcasting them. He is not quickly provoked by the failures of the parish. He does not keep a mental ledger of who is still on mile one. He simply keeps walking — past the first milestone into the country where grace is at home.

St. John Climacus, in the Ladder, describes three spiritual levels of response to being wronged:

“The first is to bear the injury reluctantly, in obedience to the commandment. The second is to rejoice at the wrong done, expecting the crown that follows patience. The third, and the most perfect, is to weep for the one who wronged us, saying: ‘Why, O Lord, does this brother sin and perish for the sake of the crown of my endurance?’” St. John Climacus, Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 8 (paraphrased)

The first is the first mile — we endure because we were told to. The second and third are the country of the second mile — where we have begun to love even those who wound us, and to grieve for them more than for ourselves.

The Second Mile in the Parish

A parish in which a few servants quietly live the second mile is, to outsiders, hard to explain. There is a warmth to it that no program can generate. Newcomers are drawn in not by the decor or the music but by the sense that the people here are not merely fulfilling an obligation — they seem to be enjoying something.

Much of this atmosphere comes from a handful of second-mile servants who keep the quiet habits in place. They arrive before the service to warm the room. They stay after to speak with the visitor no one noticed. They write the note to the sick member no one else thought to write. They cover a weak teacher's class without comment. They never mention any of it.

There is a kind of spiritual physics at work here. Where the second mile is walked consistently by even a few, it begins to pull others along. The servant who has been only a first-mile servant sees what the second costs and what it gives, and slowly begins to wonder whether he might walk a little further too. This is how parishes become radiant, and how young people eventually stay.

We should not, however, make the second mile into another law by which we measure each other. The second mile is the free country. It is the last place for obligation. If we begin policing each other's mileage, we have turned the Gospel back into the scribes' spreadsheet. The second mile is for those

who have chosen it and cannot quite say why — only that the Lord walked it first, and they would like to walk a little of the road with Him.

Training for the Road

Finally, a few practical wisdoms. The second mile is not walked by an act of will on a single Sunday. It is grown, as every Christian virtue is grown, by small daily habits.

First, make a short list each morning of today's first-mile obligations and do them with care. The first mile well walked is the quiet doorway into the second.

Second, look for the one unasked gift today could hold — a phone call, a small envelope, a stop at a sickbed, a five-minute conversation with someone we usually pass. Keep it small. Keep it unannounced.

Third, receive the second mile offered to us. Part of why servants hesitate to walk it is that we ourselves have seldom received it. When someone covers our mistake or carries our load, we should thank them honestly. Then we will understand what it is to give.

Fourth, go to confession about the first mile before we ambition the second. The servant who is honest about the ordinary obligations he has skipped is already on his way.

May the Lord who walked from the manger to the cross and past the grave for our sake give us hearts that are no longer content with the boundary of duty. May He teach us the small, daily gifts that cost more than we planned and change us more than we expected. May He deliver us from the policing of each other's miles and set us free simply to walk a little further with Him. And when the long day of our service is done, may we find that what we gave in the unrequired hour was what the Lord most remembered, and what He was most pleased to receive.

Review Questions

1. The second mile is the gift no one can demand. When have we seen a servant offer that gift recently, and what did it teach us?
2. Our Lord asks for a righteousness that exceeds, not that replaces, the Law. Where in our life is the first mile still unfinished, and how does honesty about that change the question of the second?
3. Five concrete arenas were named (teaching, hospitality, forgiveness, service, money and time). In which of these is the Lord currently inviting us to walk a little further?
4. Abba Bessarion sold the Gospel in obedience to the Gospel. What modest possession — of time, comfort, reputation — might the Lord be asking us to loosen our grip on?
5. Climacus names three levels of bearing a wrong: reluctant endurance, joyful expectation of a crown, and weeping for the one who wronged us. Which level honestly describes our hearts today, and what would the next step be?

6. A parish becomes radiant when a few servants quietly live the second mile. Who are those servants in our own parish, and what quiet habit of theirs might we begin to imitate?
7. The second mile is a free country, not another law. How do we guard ourselves against turning it into a new standard by which we measure and judge each other?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, XVIII (on Matt 5). Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 10.
- St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent (Step 8, On Meekness; Step 24, On Simplicity).
- The Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Apophthegmata Patrum), Bessarion.
- Fr. Bishoy Kamel, Life and Writings (in Arabic and in English translations published by the Coptic Orthodox Church).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, The Communion of Love.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

Do You Love Me?

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Near the end of the Gospel of John, after the Resurrection and before the Ascension, our Lord meets Simon Peter on the shore of Galilee and asks him a single question three times: 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?' (John 21:15–17). The exchange is short. Few words. Three askings, three answers, and three charges — 'Feed My lambs,' 'Tend My sheep,' 'Feed My sheep.' It is the only place in the Gospels where the Lord formally restores a fallen disciple into a shepherding role, and He does it not by asking about Peter's strength or readiness but about his love. This lesson walks slowly through that conversation and lets it search us as it once searched Peter. The question it puts to every servant is the question that outlasts every method — not 'Are you qualified?' but 'Do you love Me?' And the charge that follows is not 'manage a program' but 'tend My sheep.'

The Setting by the Sea

The scene is quiet and familiar. Peter has returned to Galilee after the Resurrection, and he has returned to his old trade. 'I am going fishing,' he tells the others, and six disciples go with him (John 21:3). They fish all night and catch nothing. At dawn the Lord is on the shore, unrecognized at first. He tells them to cast the net on the right side of the boat. The catch is so great that they cannot haul it in, and John recognizes at once: 'It is the Lord.' Peter wraps his cloak and jumps into the sea.

Everything about this moment is pastoral. There is no temple, no crowd, no rhetoric. Just a small charcoal fire on a beach, some fish, some bread, and a handful of tired men. After they have eaten, the Lord turns to Peter.

"So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Feed My lambs.'" John 21:15, NKJV

Notice the name: 'Simon, son of Jonah.' Not 'Peter' — the Rock. The Lord reaches behind the new name, behind the title, behind the three-year discipleship, and addresses the man as he was before any of it. Peter's love is being asked at the level below every role he has ever held. This is important for the servant. The Lord's question to us is not to our position in the parish but to the person underneath.

Three Questions for Three Denials

The Fathers and the Church have long seen in the three askings a deliberate undoing of the three denials. On the night of the trial, Peter had stood by another charcoal fire — the text takes pains to mention it (John 18:18) — and had three times denied that he knew the Lord. Here, around another

charcoal fire, the Lord quietly returns each denial to Peter and asks him, one by one, to answer now with love.

This is how the Lord heals. He does not pretend the wound never happened. He returns us to the place of our failure and invites us to speak again, in love, what we once spoke in fear. Peter is not lectured. He is asked a question. Each question is a gift — another chance to say, this time, what he should have said before.

St. John Chrysostom writes on this with great tenderness:

“He asks him three times, because he had denied three times; not to reproach, but to heal the wound; for where the sin is, there also is the medicine. And He sets over him, as over a repenting physician, the whole flock; that we may know that nothing so wins the love of Christ as the care of our neighbor.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXXXVIII.1 (paraphrased)

The Lord's way of restoring a fallen servant is worth our long contemplation. He does not delete the failure; He transfigures it into the material of a deeper love. The very memory of the denial becomes, over time, the humility out of which Peter will shepherd the Church.

'Do You Love Me?' — The Only Qualification That Lasts

The question the Lord asks Peter is the only question that finally matters for any servant of His flock. Before every meeting, every lesson, every decision: do we love Him? All other qualifications — gifts, training, experience — are useful servants, but they are terrible masters. Love is the root; everything else is the branches.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:1–2, NKJV

Paul's sentence stands beside the beach conversation. A servant may speak well, know much, and accomplish visibly, and still, without love, be nothing in the Lord's reckoning. The converse is also true: a servant who is limited in every measurable way but who truly loves the Lord will bear fruit that the measurable servants cannot produce.

The question 'do you love Me?' has a practical edge. When a servant is tired, when a class has gone poorly, when a parishioner has hurt us, when the ministry feels fruitless, the restoring question is always this one. Not 'am I gifted for this?' but 'do I love Him?' If the answer is yes — even quietly, even through tears — the next step is clear. Feed His lambs.

'Feed My Sheep' — Love That Takes a Shape

Our Lord does not leave Peter's love in the realm of sentiment. Every declaration of love is followed by a charge, and the charge is always about the flock.

“He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Tend My sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?' Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?' And he said to Him, 'Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed My sheep.’” John 21:16–17, NKJV

Three charges: feed the lambs, tend the sheep, feed the sheep. The Lord is making explicit that love of Him is inseparable from care for His people. We cannot love the Lord in the abstract and be indifferent to the concrete human beings He has placed around us. The love He asks for always takes the shape of pastoral labor.

This runs against a temptation that lives in every generation: to keep our love of Christ as a private glow, unconnected to the ordinary work of caring for others. The Lord refuses this division. The proof of love is not a feeling we can describe but a flock that can testify we have fed them.

St. Augustine puts it plainly:

“If thou lovest Me, feed My sheep. For what is it thou dost love in Me, if not My sheep? And whoso feeds them not, denies Me, however loud his protestations of love.” St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John, CXXIII.5 (paraphrased)

Lambs and Sheep

Our Lord does not say simply 'feed My people.' He names two groups — lambs and sheep — and the Fathers have long taken this as an instruction about the breadth of the servant's care. Lambs need feeding; sheep need tending. The young need to be fed the milk of the word (1 Peter 2:2). The mature need to be shepherded — led, protected, corrected, healed when wounded.

This division has practical weight. A servant who is good with children must remember that the adults in the parish also need feeding. A servant who teaches the adults must not forget the lambs. The servant of the elderly must not neglect the young families who are easy to overlook. The Lord's flock is various, and the servant who loves Him loves every age and condition of it.

And there is a reminder tucked inside the word 'My.' The sheep are not ours. We are not proprietors. The servant who begins to speak of 'my people' or 'my class' or 'my ministry' has forgotten something important. The flock belongs to Christ. We are allowed, for a season, to tend them on His behalf.

The Cost of Tending

After the three askings and the three charges, the Lord adds something Peter could not have anticipated:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another

will gird you and carry you where you do not wish. This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God.” John 21:18–19, NKJV

The charge to feed the sheep is immediately tied to the cross Peter will one day himself embrace. Shepherding in the Lord's kingdom is not light work. It asks of the servant a willingness to be led where he would not naturally choose, to be stretched out, to lay down his own plans. Peter will eventually die on a cross — tradition tells us, inverted at his own request — and the Lord is telling him this here, at the very moment of restoration.

The servant who reads this honestly should not be discouraged. The Lord is not cruel. He is honest. He tells Peter at the beginning of his pastoral work what shepherding will cost, so that Peter is not surprised when the cost comes. The same honesty is a gift to us. Service in His name is a form of the cross. Small crosses for some, larger for others, but in every case some laying down of the self. The servant who has come to the beach is ready for this, because he has heard the question and answered it honestly.

'Follow Me'

The whole conversation ends with two words:

“And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me.’” John 21:19, NKJV

This is where it ends. After the three questions. After the three charges. After the quiet announcement of the cross. The Lord does not give Peter a plan, a program, a five-year strategy for the Church. He gives him two words: 'Follow Me.'

This is, finally, the whole of the servant's life. We follow. Our tending of His flock is downstream of our following of Him. If we stop following Him, our tending slowly becomes our own — our opinions, our agendas, our small kingdoms. If we keep following Him, our tending stays soft, humble, and His.

The rest of John 21 closes with a gentle correction. Peter, turning, sees John and asks, 'But Lord, what about this man?' The Lord replies, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me' (John 21:22). Even at the moment of restoration, Peter is tempted to look sideways and compare. The Lord's answer is the answer to every comparing servant: what is that to you? You follow Me.

May the Lord who came to the shore that morning — who lit the fire, cooked the fish, and spoke our very name — come again to every servant whose love has grown cold. May He ask us, simply, what He asked Peter. May He meet our stammering yes with the patience that expects only more love and not less. May the lambs of His pasture be fed by our hands, the sheep tended with our voice, and the old denials of our lives transfigured, one by one, into the humility out of which we finally learn to shepherd. And when the hour comes that we too are girded and carried where we would not wish to go, may we go following Him. To Him be the glory, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Review Questions

1. The Lord addresses Peter as 'Simon, son of Jonah' — beneath the new name and the title. What would it mean for our service if the Lord addressed the person beneath our roles rather than the role itself?
2. The three askings matched the three denials. Where in our own story has the Lord returned us to the place of a failure and given us a chance to answer again in love?
3. The only qualification that finally lasts is 'do you love Me?' In a tired or discouraging week, how does returning to that question reorder our service?
4. Every declaration of love is followed by a charge to feed the flock. Is there a point at which our love of Christ has remained private and has not yet taken the shape of pastoral work?
5. The Lord speaks of both lambs and sheep. Who in our parish — of a particular age or condition — are we most tempted to overlook, and what small step toward them could we take this week?
6. The charge to tend is immediately joined to the announcement of the cross. How does it change the texture of our service to know, from the beginning, that it will cost us?
7. The conversation ends with 'Follow Me.' When we glance sideways at another servant and ask 'But Lord, what about him?', what does the Lord's answer — 'What is that to you? You follow Me' — say to us today?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, LXXXVII–LXXXVIII. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 14.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, CXXIII. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 7.
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- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John.
- Fr. Thomas Hopko, Speaking the Truth in Love (on the pastor's vocation).

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

Humility

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

The Fathers are unanimous that humility is the foundation virtue — the one from which every other grows, and without which every other collapses. 'Humility,' says St. Isaac the Syrian, 'is the raiment of the Godhead, for the Word took it upon Him when He became incarnate.' No servant has ever served fruitfully in the Lord's house without humility; no servant has ever destroyed a ministry with humility in place. This lesson looks at what the Scriptures actually mean by humility, at the life of our Lord as the definitive picture of it, at the daily shape humility takes in the servant, at its most common counterfeits, and at how humility is grown — since no one, in the end, can simply decide to be humble. We close, as the Fathers did, with the quiet consolation that humility is the short road to everything else.

What Scripture Means by Humility

The Hebrew and Greek words our Bible translates as 'humility' carry a specific sense that is often blurred in modern usage. Humility is not low self-esteem. It is not the quiet pride of a man who has perfected self-deprecation. It is a right, true, and sober estimation of who we are before God — creatures, not creators; recipients, not owners; loved, but not on the basis of any merit we could produce.

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." James 4:6, NKJV

This sentence is the New Testament's most compact statement about why humility matters so much. Grace, which is the one indispensable commodity of the Christian life, flows by gravity. It runs downhill, toward the low places. The proud soul is a hill too high to be watered. The humble soul is a valley in which grace naturally pools.

St. Augustine, in a famous phrase, answered a question about the chief of virtues by saying humility three times:

"If you ask me what is the first thing in religion, I answer the first, second, and third thing is humility." St. Augustine, Letter 118 (paraphrased)

The Humility of Our Lord

The deepest teaching on humility in Scripture is not a sentence but a Person. Our Lord is humility made visible. The Philippian hymn traces the descent from heaven to the grave as the authoritative image of what humility looks like:

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” Philippians 2:5–8, NKJV

Every phrase deserves its own meditation. 'Made Himself of no reputation' — the Greek is *ekenosen*, emptied. The eternal Son did not cling to His prerogatives. 'Taking the form of a bondservant' — the position, in first-century vocabulary, of the lowest member of a household. 'Humbled Himself' — not humbled by another; His own act. 'Obedient to the point of death' — the descent did not stop at the manger; it went all the way.

This is the definitive picture. Humility is not a posture one occasionally adopts when convenient; it is a willing, reasoned descent for love's sake, motivated by the well-being of another. The Lord who is humility took the towel and washed His disciples' feet the night He was betrayed (John 13). That image is not accidental. It was given to us, the Lord said, 'that you should do as I have done to you' (John 13:15).

Our Lord's own words on Himself are few and precious, and humility is one of them:

“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Matthew 11:29, NKJV

'Gentle and lowly.' Of all the adjectives the Lord could have chosen to describe Himself, these are the two He chose. A servant who has understood this will find a great deal of his anxiety about his own dignity quietly dissolving.

The Daily Shape of Humility

Humility is not a mood or a tone of voice. It has concrete shapes in the daily life of a servant, and the Fathers and the parish have named them clearly.

First, humility is attentive. It listens longer than it speaks. It notices the one person in the room no one has addressed. It takes interest in the story being told even when it knows the story already.

Second, humility is teachable. It is willing to learn from anyone — from an older father, from a peer, from a Sunday-school child, from a stranger on the bus. The proud soul has finished learning; the humble one is just beginning.

Third, humility is thankful. It sees every good in its life as a gift received, not a possession earned. Thanksgiving is the most reliable thermometer of humility. Complaint is its opposite.

Fourth, humility serves quietly. It does not announce its own service. It does not need credit. 'Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them' (Matthew 6:1). The truly humble servant is often invisible, because he has made a habit of being invisible.

Fifth, humility confesses. It does not defend itself reflexively when corrected. It does not attempt to prove, at length, that the correction was unfair. It is willing to be wrong — sometimes wrong out loud, in front of others — because it has already given up the brittle project of protecting an image of itself.

Sixth, humility submits. It is willing to receive direction from its father of confession, its bishop, its priest, its spouse, its parish council, the Gospel itself — without turning every instruction into a negotiation.

These six together describe a recognizable kind of person. We have all met such a servant. In the Lord's providence, we have usually met them quietly, because the humble servant has no interest in being met.

St. Dorotheos of Gaza was asked what humility is, and answered:

“The humble man never falls. How could he? For he is already below everyone. And the proud man never rises — for how could he rise, when his mind is already above where it ought to be?” St. Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourses and Sayings II (paraphrased)

The Counterfeits

Humility has several common counterfeits, and naming them is useful — because servants often imagine they have the virtue when they have only the imitation.

The first counterfeit is self-deprecation. It looks like humility; it is a form of pride in reverse. The self-deprecating servant speaks of himself constantly, only with a negative valence. His soul is as occupied with itself as the boaster's is. The truly humble person thinks of himself seldom.

The second is performance of humility. We know we are supposed to be humble, so we perform its outward gestures — the soft voice, the downcast eye, the quick denial of any compliment — without the underlying reality. The Lord's words against the scribes who loved to 'sit in the chief seats of the synagogues' (Matthew 23:6) apply equally to those who love to sit in the last seat, provided everyone can see.

The third is false smallness. A servant declines a role he is gifted for and obligated to, and covers this with the language of humility. It is not humility to refuse what the Lord has asked of us. It is fear dressed in humble clothes.

The fourth is the refusal of praise. When a brother thanks us honestly, to brush it off violently — 'oh, no, it was nothing' — is often not humility but discomfort. Humility can receive thanks graciously, giving the glory quietly to God, without spectacle either way.

The fifth is comparison in the form of self-abasement. 'I am not like that great servant over there,' we say, and we have already turned our soul back onto itself. The humble servant does not compare. He attends to the work in front of him.

How Humility Is Grown

No one becomes humble by deciding to. Humility is not produced by willpower; if it were, the exercise would immediately destroy itself. Humility is grown slowly, by the quiet work of grace through ordinary means. A few of these means are worth naming.

First, regular confession. Nothing humbles a soul like telling the truth about itself to another human being before God. A servant who keeps a living relationship with a father of confession is being slowly, reliably, lowered.

Second, the Psalms. The daily praying of the Psalter — 'I am a worm, and no man' (Psalm 22:6), 'Create in me a clean heart, O God' (Psalm 51:10) — teaches the soul its right register over time.

Third, gratitude practiced at the end of each day. A short review, naming the day's gifts by name, teaches the soul that it is a receiver. Receivers are naturally lower than givers.

Fourth, the small humiliations we would not have chosen. A correction from a child. A mistake noticed in front of others. A meeting we prepared for carefully that went poorly anyway. The Fathers called these providential humiliations. The soul that receives them without protest is being formed.

Fifth, the company of humble servants. We become like the people we keep close. A wise friendship with a genuinely humble servant — even one, even once a week — works on the soul more than a month of reading about humility.

Sixth, long attendance at the Liturgy. The one who has been worshiping the crucified Lord week after week, year after year, is being shaped by the thing he adores. 'We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image' (2 Corinthians 3:18). The worshiped Lord was humble; the worshipers are, slowly, becoming humble too.

St. Isaac the Syrian's famous saying captures what this growth finally looks like:

"Humility is the raiment of the Godhead, for the Word who became man clothed Himself with it, and spoke to us in it. And every one who hath clothed himself therewith hath verily been made like unto Him who came down from His own height, and hid the splendor of His majesty, and veiled His glory in humility, lest creation should be destroyed by the sight of Him." St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, Homily 77 (paraphrased)

Humility in the Service

In the concrete life of a parish, humility has a recognizable look.

The humble teacher prepares carefully, teaches his best, and then quickly forgets whether he taught well. He does not replay his performance. He does not fish for compliments. He thinks, instead, about the children whose eyes looked tired.

The humble leader invites correction. He actually wants to hear what the others in the meeting think. He is not threatened when a younger servant proposes a better idea; he is glad, because the kingdom has benefited.

The humble parent confesses his own failures to his children. He does not pretend. The child learns, from this, what to do when his own failures come.

The humble spouse apologizes first. He has given up on the calculation of whose fault it was. Love, in his marriage, is larger than the accounting of who owes what.

The humble deacon, chanter, or subdeacon arrives on time, stays until the end, and is as serious about the Wednesday evening Vespers with fifteen people as about the Paschal liturgy with five hundred. The crowd is not why he serves.

The humble servant, facing a failure in ministry, does not look first for someone else to blame. He asks, 'Where did I contribute to this?' and he goes to confession. The ministry heals because the servant has.

A common pastoral test, handed down in many spiritual traditions: if a servant can be overlooked without resentment, he has begun to learn humility. If he can be wrongly blamed without defending himself at length, he has grown further. If he can be outright insulted and feel no ripple of wounded pride, he has nearly arrived. Most of us are on the first step. The Lord is patient.

The Short Road

There is one last word to add. The desert Fathers considered humility not a burdensome virtue but the shortest road home.

"I saw all the snares of the enemy spread out upon the earth, and I groaned and said, 'Who then can pass through them?' And I heard a voice saying to me, 'The humble, my son.'" Abba Anthony, Apophthegmata Patrum

The humble pass through every snare of the enemy, because there is nothing in them for the snares to catch on. Pride is the hook the devil most reliably uses. Humility leaves no hook.

This is also why humility is the shortest road to joy. The proud soul is exhausted — constantly defending, comparing, performing. The humble soul has set all that down. It has less to protect, therefore less to lose. It is lighter. It laughs easily. It rests.

The Mother of God, whose humility carried the Son of God, sang at the beginning of the Gospel a song that is the whole curriculum in miniature:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant... He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly." Luke 1:46–48, 52, NKJV

He exalts the lowly. That is the direction of grace. That is the map of the Christian life.

May the Lord who took the towel on the night He was betrayed teach us to take it too. May He free us from the small exhausting work of defending ourselves, and set us free for the lighter work of loving the people He has placed before us. May He expose the humility's counterfeits in our own hearts without shaming us. May He use the small, unchosen humiliations of our days as the quiet instruments of our growth. And may He grant us, before our service is done, that humility which St. Isaac called the

raiment of the Godhead — the very robe He Himself wore into our flesh. To Him be the glory, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Review Questions

1. Humility is not low self-esteem but a sober estimation of ourselves before God. Where has this misunderstanding of humility been quietly at work in us?
2. The Philippian hymn names the Lord's humility as willing, reasoned descent for love's sake. What small descent is the Lord inviting us into this week for the sake of another person?
3. Of the six daily shapes named (attentive, teachable, thankful, quietly serving, confessing, submitting), which one is most alive in us, and which most needs attention?
4. Five counterfeits were described (self-deprecation, performance, false smallness, violent refusal of praise, comparison in self-abasement). Have we detected any of these in ourselves recently, and how did we recognize them?
5. Humility is grown by means we often do not choose — especially the small providential humiliations of the day. Can we name one such humiliation recently and how we responded to it?
6. A humble servant can be overlooked without resentment, wrongly blamed without long defense, insulted without ripple. Which of these three honestly locates where we are today?
7. The Mother of God sings, 'He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.' How does keeping this end before us change our willingness to take the last place in the service?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies, Homily 77 (on humility). Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston).
- St. Dorotheos of Gaza, Discourses and Sayings, Discourse II (on humility).
- St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 22 (Vainglory) and Step 25 (Humility).
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Letters (Letter 118 to Dioscorus).
- The Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Apophthegmata Patrum), especially Abba Anthony and Abba Moses.
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way (on humility as the foundation).

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

CHAPTER

3.2 FRUITFULNESS IN THE SERVANT

Faith

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Faith is the ground on which every other virtue stands. A servant without faith may still work, still speak, still organize — but nothing he does will carry weight in the kingdom, because the kingdom answers only to the Lord in whom we believe. In this lesson we look at faith not as a feeling but as a living trust: a trust with a face (the face of our Lord Jesus Christ), a history (the long line of witnesses in Hebrews 11), a shape (faith working through love), a cost (faith tested in the furnace), and a fruit (the quiet confidence that God is faithful, whatever the hour looks like). The Church has always known that the servant stands or falls on this single thing. Let us look at it carefully, and let us come to the end of the lesson not only understanding faith, but wanting it more than we wanted it when we began.

What Scripture Means When It Says 'Faith'

There is a sentence in the Letter to the Hebrews that the Church has returned to for twenty centuries because, in a single line, it gives us the whole working definition of faith.

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

Hebrews 11:1, NKJV

Two words carry the weight of the verse. Faith is 'substance' — the Greek word is hypostasis, the same word the Church would later use for the three divine Persons. It means underlying reality, the thing that is actually there beneath appearances. And faith is 'evidence' — a legal term, the kind of proof that stands up in court. Put the two together and we have a startling claim: what we cannot see with our eyes is, in fact, more solid than what we can. The unseen Lord is more real than the seen room we are sitting in. His promises are more certain than the newspaper on the table. Faith is the faculty that lets us live as though that were true, because it is true.

This means faith is not, first of all, a feeling we manage to generate. It is not the strength of our convictions. It is a trust in a Person who has spoken, and whose word has been shown to be reliable. The writer of Hebrews, having given us the definition, immediately stops defining and starts remembering. He calls up Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Rahab, and lets us watch how faith actually looked in the flesh. In every case, faith meant taking God at His word and acting accordingly, sometimes over decades, usually in the dark.

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” Hebrews 11:13, NKJV

Notice the progression: they saw, they were assured, they embraced, they confessed. Faith did not finish its work in their lifetimes. They did not receive what was promised. And yet they held on,

because the God who had promised was Himself the substance of their hope. For our own service this is a deep comfort. Much of what we labor for we will not live to see. The students we teach today may not visibly bear fruit for a generation. That does not make our service less fruitful. It makes it more clearly an act of faith.

Faith Has a Face

It matters enormously that Christian faith is not faith in 'God in general.' It is faith in a particular Person: the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. The very next verse after the great roll-call of Hebrews 11 turns our eyes to Him.

“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

He is the author of our faith — its beginning, the One who first kindled trust in our heart. And He is the finisher — the One who will bring that same trust to its completion, so that on the last day we will not be left with a partial work. Between those two poles, the whole of our life is the race.

This face-to-face shape of faith is what distinguishes Christian trust from every other kind. We do not merely believe that God exists. The demons also believe, James reminds us, and they tremble (James 2:19). We believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, who has a voice we have heard, wounds we have seen, a Body we have received. Faith, for the servant, is therefore always personal. It is the posture of a heart that has come to know a Person and has decided to trust Him — not only with Sunday, but with the whole of the coming week, and the whole of the coming trial, and the whole of the coming death.

“Faith is the eye that seeth the Lord; faith is the ear that heareth Him; faith is the feet that go unto Him; faith is the hand that receiveth Him. But the Lord whom faith beholdeth is Himself the gift that faith receiveth.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews XXI.4

Faith That Works Through Love

St. Paul, in the letter to the Galatians, gives us the shape of a living faith in one unforgettable phrase.

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.” Galatians 5:6, NKJV

Three nouns and a participle: faith, working, through love. Faith is not static. It is not kept in a jar on a shelf. Faith works — it moves, it reaches, it carries. And the channel through which it moves is love. A faith that does not flow into love for the brother in front of us has not yet begun to do its proper work. Conversely, works that do not flow out of faith are not yet what the Lord is asking of us either; they are our own labor, kept under our own name.

This is the point St. James presses so gently and firmly in his epistle. Faith and works are not rivals; they are the two sides of a single living reality. A faith that never shows is not a faith that has yet become fully itself.

“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? ... Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” James 2:14, 17, NKJV

For the servant this is practical and daily. Faith that has become love will show up as the ride offered to the tired parishioner, the patient lesson prepared for the restless student, the prayer said quietly for the one who hurt us, the phone call made to the absent one. None of these things, taken individually, will feel heroic. Put them together across a lifetime of service, and we have the picture of a faith that has actually been working.

“Faith is not perfected in words alone, but in the works that proceed from it. For as the body without the spirit is dead, so is faith without its corresponding life. He who loves, already believes; and he who truly believes cannot but love.” St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book IV

Faith in the Darkness

If faith is the substance of things hoped for, it is because we often hope for things we cannot yet see. There are seasons in the life of every servant when the Lord seems to withdraw His felt nearness. The prayer goes dry. The Scripture reads like ink. The labor bears no visible fruit. In these seasons, our faith is not being extinguished; it is being tempered. The Lord is letting us learn to trust not the emotion of His presence but the word of His promise.

“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

The image of gold in the furnace is one the Fathers have loved. A faith that has never been tried is, so to speak, an untested metal. It may look like gold, but it has not yet proven itself such. The fire is unpleasant. It is also the only thing that will bring forth what is most precious. The servant who has walked through a dry season with the Lord and has not walked away from Him comes back carrying a quality of trust that the easy years could not have produced.

“Let us not be troubled when we do not feel the sweetness of grace, nor yet when we walk in the darkness of some tribulation. For it is in that very darkness that God is most at work, hollowing out the soul that it may contain more of Him. Faith in such hours is the lamp which, because it burneth in the night, doth truly shine.” St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies LXXIII

There is one concrete habit, more than any other, that sustains faith in the darkness: the deliberate remembering of what the Lord has done before. Every disciple has a small personal history of His goodness — an answered prayer, a sin forgiven, a door opened, a burden lifted. In dry seasons, we should speak that history aloud, if only to ourselves, and we should do it often. 'The God who did that for me then is the same God now.' That sentence, repeated with conviction, is one of the great disciplines of faith.

The Faith of the Servant

Everything we have said so far applies to every believer. But there is a particular intensity to the faith required of the servant, because the servant is daily asking other people to trust the Lord, and he cannot ask of others what he has not given himself.

Our Lord Himself marveled at faith in only two places in the Gospels — both of them not in the company of the scribes, but in people outside the religious professionals of the day. A Roman centurion, who had grasped that a word from Christ would be enough, was met with astonishment: 'I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel' (Matthew 8:10). A Canaanite woman who would not be turned away was told, 'O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire' (Matthew 15:28). In both cases, faith was the thing the Lord looked for — and when He found it, the miracle unfolded.

A servant cultivates the faith of the centurion: a deep reverence for the authority of the word of Christ. The centurion understood hierarchy; he knew that when a commander speaks, the thing is done. Our faith in the efficacy of our Lord's word — in Scripture, in sacrament, in absolution, in the small prayer we say over a sick child — is the servant's working capital. When we speak in His Name, we are not offering our own wisdom; we are relaying the word of a Master whose authority the winds and the sea obey.

And a servant cultivates the faith of the Canaanite woman: a tenacity that does not let go. Some of the people we are given to serve will make us wait. Some will seem to resist the work the Lord is doing in them. A servant who gives up at the first refusal has not yet learned the patience of faith. She stayed. She argued sweetly. She received.

"Jesus said to him, 'If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!'" Mark 9:23–24, NKJV

It is perhaps the most honest prayer in the Gospels, and it is the prayer of every servant who has been at this work for more than a few years. Faith is not the absence of unbelief; it is the willingness to bring our unbelief to the Lord and ask Him to heal it. That very asking is itself faith.

Growing in Faith

Faith is a gift, but it is also a muscle. It grows in specific ways, through specific means that the Church has handed down to us. Let us name a few of them, because we will be asked, often, what to do when our faith feels thin — and it helps to have an answer.

First, faith grows by Scripture. 'Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God' (Romans 10:17). A daily portion of the Gospels, read slowly and prayerfully, is the simplest means of strengthening faith that exists. The Lord speaks, and the soul recognizes His voice, and trust is quietly kindled.

Second, faith grows by the Eucharist. There is no stronger catechesis in the bodily reality of our Lord's nearness than the regular receiving of His Body and Blood. A servant who communes attentively — who actually knows what he is doing when he approaches the chalice — will find faith deepening without fanfare, week by week.

Third, faith grows by the testimony of the saints. Hebrews 11 is not only the definition of faith but the medicine for its weakness. When our own faith feels small, we stand in the cloud of witnesses and let their fidelity lend us courage. Reading a life of St. Antony, or St. Mary of Egypt, or a modern confessor, is not a substitute for our own faith, but it often re-kindles it.

Fourth, faith grows by obedient action. We do not wait until we feel perfectly certain before we act; we act on what faith we have, and the Lord meets us in the action. 'If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine' (John 7:17). Faith is often given not in the armchair but on the road — which is to say, in the midst of actually trying to live what we have been taught.

Fifth, faith grows by community. The Lord has placed us in a Body, and the faith of our brothers and sisters holds us up on days when our own is small. When we cannot believe by ourselves, we can stand among those who can, and let their faith carry us for a while. This is one of the oldest meanings of being in the Church: we are saved together.

"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." Hebrews 10:24–25, NKJV

May the Lord who is Himself the author and finisher of our faith increase it in us day by day. May He give us the trust of the centurion in the power of His word, the tenacity of the Canaanite woman in the face of His silences, and the honesty of the weeping father who could say, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.' And may every servant among us find, at the end of a long life of small trusts renewed morning by morning, that faith has become sight, and that the Person in whom we have been trusting all along is waiting to welcome us home.

Review Questions

1. Hebrews 11:1 calls faith the 'substance of things hoped for.' In what ways does our own daily life show that we treat the unseen realities of God as more solid than the seen?
2. Christian faith has a Face — the Lord Jesus Christ. How does remembering that faith is trust in a Person (not a set of propositions) change the way we speak about faith with those we serve?

3. 'Faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6) names the living shape of faith. Where in our own week has faith recently 'worked' in concrete acts of love, and where is it asking us to move next?
4. Every servant walks through dry seasons when the felt nearness of the Lord withdraws. What disciplines of remembering His past goodness can help carry us through such seasons without letting go of Him?
5. Our Lord marveled at the faith of the centurion (authority) and the Canaanite woman (tenacity). Which of these two dimensions of faith is the Lord currently growing in us, and how?
6. The weeping father's prayer — 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief' — may be the most honest prayer in the Gospels. What would it look like to pray it deliberately this week over a specific situation?
7. Name one of the means of growing in faith (Scripture, Eucharist, saints, obedient action, community). What concrete change in our rhythm of life could allow that means to work more fully in us this coming month?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 14.
- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, Books IV–VI.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies. Translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston).
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, on John 6 and John 7.
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. St. George's Coptic Orthodox Church, Sporting, Alexandria.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

Life of Victory

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

There is no Christian who has not wondered, in the middle of a long dark night, whether this fight is worth it. There is no servant who has not at some point asked whether God sees, whether God hears, whether the victory we read about in Scripture is the kind of victory that could ever really be ours. The answer of the Gospel is yes — but not in the way we often hope. The Christian life is not a life without struggle; it is a life that finds its victory inside of the struggle. Our Lord did not promise to spare us from trial. He promised something far greater: that in Him, we would overcome. To live a life of victory is not to flee the battle but to stand in it with arms outstretched to the One who has already crossed the finish line and whose hand has never let go of ours. This is not an abstract teaching. It is the lens through which every disappointment, every weakness, every unanswered prayer, every late-night temptation is transformed. Nothing the enemy sets before us lies outside the scope of a victory already won. Our work, then, is not to manufacture that victory — we cannot, and we were never asked to. Our work is simply to stand inside of it: to keep watch, to stay in the ranks, and to lift up the weapons the Lord has already placed in our hands.

The Necessity of Struggle

How often we equate a successful life with a comfortable one. How often we pray, with hearts weary of trial, “Lord, take this away.” It is a natural prayer, and the Lord does not scold us for praying it — He Himself prayed something very much like it in Gethsemane. But it was not the final prayer He prayed in the garden, and it cannot be the prayer that finally shapes our lives as servants.

Jesus did not promise us a life without tribulation. He promised a life of victory inside of it. On the night of His betrayal — the darkest night of His life, in His last private conversation with His disciples — He reached for the very fear that rises in our throats at every difficult moment, and gently stilled it:

“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)

There is tenderness in that sentence. He says “be of good cheer” to a small group of men He knows will, that very week, watch Him die. The peace He gives them is not the peace of the world, which asks for calm seas before it can rest. It is a peace that holds us in the middle of the storm, whispering over the wind that it has already heard a greater voice than the one howling outside. That is the peace our Lord has for us tonight.

The Desert Fathers knew this deeply. Abba Poemen tells the story of Abba John the Dwarf, a monk so exhausted by his own passions that he prayed the Lord would simply take them away so he could live,

at last, free of care. In His mercy, the Lord granted it. John went to his elder, glowing, and said, “I find myself in peace, without an enemy.” But the elder looked at him with sad, knowing eyes and replied:

“Go, beseech God to stir up warfare so that you regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress.” – Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Abba Poemen 78, on Abba John the Dwarf)

John prayed again — not that the conflict be removed this time, but that he be given strength for the fight. It is one of the great reversals of the spiritual life, and it should be our pattern too. The elder’s counsel cuts against every modern instinct: a life without struggle is not a life closer to God; it is a life further from Him. Where there is no contest, there is no growth. Where there is no humility, there is no room for grace.

So when hardship comes — and it will come: a failing marriage, a wayward child, a prolonged illness, a dryness in prayer that stretches into weeks — we must resist the first impulse to ask only for escape. Let us pray, instead, like Abba John. Let us ask for strength to endure. Let us ask to be made worthy of what the Lord is doing in us. The One who has overcome the world stands beside us in the contest, and the very contest itself is part of His tender work in our souls.

The Christian Race

St. Paul loved the language of the arena. He had grown up in a world that knew athletes the way our world knows artists and kings — their names in every mouth, their bodies carved into marble, their victories celebrated for generations. When he wrote to the Corinthians, whose own city hosted the famous Isthmian Games, he reached for the image he knew every one of his readers would feel in his bones: the lone runner, the flaring breath, the narrow lane between victory and disqualification.

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:24–27, NKJV)

An athlete disciplines the body to win a medal; the Christian disciplines body, mind, and spirit for a crown that does not fade. Consider for a moment what an Olympic runner gives up — late nights, lazy mornings, favorite foods, whole seasons of the easy life — all for a wreath of olive leaves that will brown in a week. The honest question is whether we give up as much for the eternal crown as he gives up for the perishable one. St. Paul’s question is unsettling precisely because we accept the athlete’s ordering as sensible and resist the disciple’s as excessive. It should not be so.

Our culture offers a very different vision of the good life. It prizes comfort and removes every obstacle. It whispers to us that the easy life is the blessed life, and that if a discipline costs us anything at all, something must be wrong. The Christian takes exactly the opposite view. The obstacles are the

training. Without a contest there is no prize, and without struggle there is no sanctification. The servant who waits for his life to become easy before he begins to fight is like a runner who waits for the race to become downhill before he bothers to move his feet.

And there is this: our Lord Himself, who needed no training, entered the arena first. Before He asked anything of us, He walked in front of us:

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.” (Matthew 4:1–2, NKJV)

Notice the grammar carefully. He was led by the Spirit into the temptation. The wilderness was not an interruption of His ministry; it was part of it. He went there deliberately, He fasted deliberately, He was hungry deliberately — so that when we meet our own wilderness, we would know in our bones that our Captain has been there first. Every footprint of trial we will ever walk in has already been walked in by Him.

Triumph Over Temptation

The wilderness temptations of Christ are the pattern for every fight we will ever wage. They lay out the three arenas in which the enemy always comes at us — the body, the pride, and the will. In each of them our Lord chose the harder answer. And in each of them He gave us, His weary younger brothers and sisters, a pattern we can take into our own struggles today.

First, the body. After forty days of fasting, Jesus was truly hungry — not the inconvenient hunger of a missed lunch but the deep, cellular hunger of a man whose body is eating itself. The devil’s proposal was not, at first glance, sinful. Jesus had every right as God to eat, and the stones would have harmed no one. And yet He refused:

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’” (Matthew 4:4, NKJV; cf. Deuteronomy 8:3)

He shows us that even our most legitimate physical needs — food, sleep, comfort, affection — are not allowed to become our highest loyalty. Victory here is not the crushing of the body. It is the quiet, hard-won conviction that settles into the soul over many small refusals: I am satisfied in the Lord. The servant who can say that over a skipped meal for the sake of prayer, or an hour of sleep given up for a brother in need, is being trained by God to say it in the larger trials that are coming.

Second, pride. Christ could have displayed His divinity to Satan with a single word and ended the contest in the first round. Instead He chose patience and humility. The Scriptures warn us repeatedly — tenderly and pointedly — of what boasting invites into a life. Consider King Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man in the known world, standing on the roof of his palace, looking out over the gardens and walls and wonders he had built, saying to himself:

“Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?” (Daniel 4:30, NKJV)

The words were still warm on his lips when judgment fell. He was driven from men and lived as a beast in the fields, eating grass like an ox, until at last he lifted his eyes to heaven. St. Jerome, commenting on this passage, warns every reader who builds, governs, or is praised for his wisdom:

“Nebuchadnezzar’s arrogance and boasting are immediately punished by the Lord; the very breath with which he exalted himself was taken away. Let every man who builds, who governs, who is praised for his wisdom, read this and tremble.” – St. Jerome, Commentary on Daniel 4.28–33

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Our achievements are gifts, not trophies. We do not build what is good in our lives; He builds it and lets us participate. The servant who forgets this in a moment of public praise — a well-received sermon, a successful program, a kind word after liturgy — has already begun to lose the very thing he is tempted to congratulate himself for. The safest posture before every success is the bowed head.

Third, the will. This is the quietest and longest of the three battles, because it is the most interior. No one sees it. The victories are rarely applauded; the defeats are rarely noticed. But this is where we are most deeply shaped into the likeness of Christ or deformed into the likeness of the world. St. Athanasius and St. Cyril of Alexandria taught that the deepest meaning of salvation is that we are so united to Christ that we begin to bear His very attributes — His patience, His mercy, His steadfast love. The Friday Theotokia sings this mystery back to us every week, and we ought to let it settle into our hearts:

“He took what is ours, and gave us what is His, that we may praise Him, and exalt Him above all, forever.” – Friday Theotokia, Part 11

This is the logic of the will’s victory. Christ does not merely help us fight. He gives us His own victory to stand in. If we do not struggle with our sin — if we let it quietly coexist with our prayer, if we whisper to ourselves that it isn’t so bad, that everyone struggles with it, that we’ll deal with it next week — we receive no portion of His victory over it. The servant who wants to see a life of virtue must first be honest enough to see a life of vice in himself, and humble enough to bring it to the only One who can exchange it.

For teaching and for review, these three wilderness temptations belong in a single frame. Each of Christ’s answers is a single line of Scripture, spoken in simple confidence — and each of them is a line every servant can memorize tonight and carry into his own fight tomorrow:

Arena	The Devil’s Offer	Christ’s Answer (NKJV)	Reference
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Body	Turn these stones into bread	“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”	Matthew 4:3–4
Pride	Throw Yourself down; angels will bear You up	“You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”	Matthew 4:5–7
Will	All the kingdoms of the world, if You will bow	“Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”	Matthew 4:8–10

Across the rows, the pattern becomes luminous. In each arena Christ answers the devil not with a clever argument, not with a display of power, but with a verse of Holy Scripture — and in each arena His answer says the same thing in shape: we are not our own; we are the Lord’s. We are given the same arena, and we are invited to give the same answer.

Weapons of Victory

Here is the good news no one tells us clearly enough: the Christian does not enter the contest unarmed. Scripture, prayer, the intercession of the angels and saints, and the sacramental life of the Church — these are not decorations of the pious life. They are the weapons of the fighting one. St. Paul does not speak about them as optional extras. He speaks about them in the voice of a battlefield captain handing armor to young soldiers:

“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. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.” (Ephesians 6:11–13, NKJV)

Scripture is the first of these weapons, and the easiest to neglect. Christ Himself answered each temptation in the wilderness with a verse — not with a clever argument, not with a display of power, but with a line of Holy Scripture spoken in simple confidence. The Word of God comforts us when we are afraid, strengthens us when we are weary, enlightens us when we are confused, and leads us home. A daily reading of Scripture, done in humility and without hurry, is the Christian’s training ground. The servant who has not memorized even a small handful of verses for the fights he already knows are coming has left part of his armor in the tent.

Prayer is the second. Nothing drives the devil off like a humble and broken heart. Arrow prayers — short, direct lines to God shot off in the middle of the day — are a lifeline in the middle of temptation, and they ask for nothing we do not already have. The Jesus Prayer is the simplest and one of the strongest:

“My Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” – The Jesus Prayer (Agpeya tradition)

The Jesus Prayer belongs in every moment of the day — on the drive home, in the elevator, in the moment when anger begins to rise, or lust begins to whisper, or despair begins to close around the heart. And when we have prayed it, we do not stop there — we go further, to the floor. Metanoias, the physical prostrations that accompany our prayer, proclaim with the body what the heart already knows: that we are weak, that God is almighty, and that the distance between us must be closed by His condescension, not by our pretense. The servant who has never fallen on his face in his own room does not yet know the full range of his prayer.

Third are the angels and the saints. We must not be shy of them. Every time a Christian overcomes temptation, the angels minister to him, just as they ministered to our Lord after His forty days:

“Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.” (Matthew 4:11, NKJV)

Our beloved Pope Kyrillos VI grew the Coptic Church for twelve years largely through prayer, and his prayer was constantly populated with the angels and the saints. He spoke to them the way a small child speaks to his older brothers and sisters — confidently, specifically, expecting them to come. They did. They come still. We can call on them before we walk into the classroom, the hospital room, the late-night hours alone with a lit screen. They are already being sent.

Fourth is the sacramental life of the Church. The Mysteries of Confession and Communion are not the ornaments of a settled piety. They are food and medicine for a soul at war. A servant who has not confessed in many weeks is not a spiritually advanced servant; he is a hungry soldier, and he has forgotten that he is. A servant who has not received the Body and Blood of Christ is not operating from strength; he is operating from memory. Let us come to the altar. Let us allow Christ to feed us.

St. Paul gathers all four weapons under a single posture, and the posture is one word long:

“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. To be watchful is to refuse both complacency and despair at once. The complacent servant assumes he will not be attacked and is caught defenseless. The despairing servant assumes he will not prevail and stops trying. Both are wrong, and Christ has a word for both. The watchful servant does not need to conquer the devil — Christ has already done that, and perfectly. The watchful servant needs only to stay in the ranks of the One who has.

These four weapons take the shape of four simple disciplines in the servant’s week — rhythms that can be written down, placed on the calendar, and made real:

- Scripture. A fixed time and a fixed place for daily reading — even ten minutes at the same hour — will change us. One verse memorized each week for the temptation we already know is coming.

- Prayer. The Agpeya at the opening and closing of every day. Between those hours, arrow prayers whenever temptation arrives — the Jesus Prayer, the Trisagion, or simply and without shame, “Lord, help me.”
- Angels and saints. A patron saint named for each arena of ministry, and their intercession sought by name before we step into it. The angels asked to surround us before we enter the places temptation waits.
- Sacraments. Confession regularly, not occasionally. Communion at every liturgy we are able. Received as medicine for the fight, not as rewards for having already won it.

The Crown That Does Not Fade

A life of victory is not a boastful life. It cannot be — because the victory is not ours. It is Christ’s, and He has freely, lovingly, joined us to it. The servant who understands this begins to serve differently. He is no longer anxious about his struggles, because he knows they are the training ground of a crown he did not earn. He is no longer ashamed of them, because he knows the arena was walked first by his Lord. He is no longer afraid of a new temptation nor surprised by an old one, because he has seen, at last, that the fight was never his alone.

Every resisted temptation we will ever win, every humble prayer we will ever pray, every arrow shot toward heaven in the middle of a hard night — each is a small participation in the victory of the One who has already overcome the world. St. Paul, near the end of his life, under the shadow of the Roman sword, and with nothing left to prove to anyone, looked back on his own race and wrote these words for every servant who would ever come after him:

“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 4:7–8, NKJV)

Notice what he did not say. He did not say, “I have lived a comfortable life.” He did not say, “I have avoided trouble.” He said, “I have fought the good fight.” The language is the language of the arena, the same vocabulary he once gave the Corinthians — and the crown he describes is not laid up only for him. It is for everyone who has loved the Lord’s appearing. That is to say, it is for everyone who has kept watch in the contest and has refused to leave the ranks. It is for us.

So let us stand. Let us stand inside the victory of Christ — and draw our peace from His peace, our strength from His strength, our endurance from His endurance. When the struggle returns tonight (and it will return), we need not be afraid. He has been there first. When the crown is placed, one day, upon our heads by the righteous Judge, we will know in the depth of our hearts that we never ran alone, that every footstep of the long race was His footstep, and that the crown itself is His gift to us — a crown that does not fade.

Review Questions

1. Why did Christ promise His disciples tribulation rather than ease? What does His tender word, “be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NKJV), reveal about the shape of Christian victory in the life of a servant?
2. Abba John the Dwarf asked first that his passions be removed, then later that he be given strength to fight them. Can we point to a struggle in our own lives that, in hindsight, produced growth we would not have chosen to receive any other way?
3. How do the three wilderness temptations of Christ — body, pride, will — correspond to the three arenas of our own fight? Which of the three does the enemy most often come at us in, and what line of Scripture might we memorize this week as our answer?
4. Which “weapon of victory” (Scripture, prayer, the angels and saints, the sacraments) is weakest in our servant life right now? What is one concrete step we can take this week to strengthen it — not next month, this week?
5. St. Paul says the crown of righteousness is laid up for “all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8, NKJV). In the life of a servant this month, what would it practically look like to love the appearing of Christ?

Books & References

Scripture: John 16:33; 1 Corinthians 9:24–27; Matthew 4:1–11; Ephesians 6:10–18; 2 Timothy 4:7–8 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Abba Poemen 78 (on Abba John the Dwarf).
- St. Jerome, Commentary on Daniel 4.28–33.
- St. Athanasius of Alexandria, On the Incarnation.
- St. Cyril of Alexandria, on the exchange of attributes in Christ.
- Friday Theotokia, Part 11 (Coptic Orthodox hymnal).
- The Jesus Prayer, as handed down in the Agpeya tradition.
- Pope Kyrillos VI of Alexandria, testimony on the intercession of the angels and the saints.

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

Lesson Notes

Christology & Us - Means of Working with Divine Grace

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

This final lesson of Unit 3 gathers up the whole curriculum into a single, central truth: that the Christian life, and therefore the servant's life, is not our own striving decorated with religion but the very life of the incarnate Son of God made our own by grace. Christology — who our Lord Jesus Christ is — is not an abstract subject for scholars. It is the ground on which every servant stands. Because He became what we are, we may become, by grace, what He is. Because He joined our flesh to His Godhead, the means of grace that He has placed in the Church are not symbolic gestures but the very channels of His life into ours. In this lesson we look at what it means to cooperate, day by day, with the grace that flows from our incarnate Lord — how to open our lives to it, how to receive it through the channels He has given us, and how to let it bear fruit in our service.

Why Christology Is for the Servant

There is a temptation, in the daily rush of service, to think of theology as a separate room — a place scholars visit — and of our own work as being out here, among real people, with real problems. The early Church did not think this way, and the Fathers will not let us think this way either. Every great pastoral teacher of the Church has been, first, a theologian of the Person of Christ, because every pastoral act — a sermon, an absolution, a Eucharist, a visit to the sick — draws its power from who He is.

“He became what we are, that He might make us what He Himself is.” St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies V, Preface

That single sentence is perhaps the most condensed statement of Christology for us that the early Church ever made. The Son of God did not come merely to teach us, correct us, or inspire us. He came to take on our nature — genuinely, without shortcut, body and soul and history and death — so that our nature, united to Him, might be drawn into the life He has eternally with the Father. The technical name for this is theosis, participation in the divine life. It is what the Church has always believed the gospel to be about. It is also the reason the servant's work has any weight at all. When we teach, we are not imparting information to minds; we are, in some real way, bringing the incarnate Lord closer to a brother so that his nature too may be drawn into the life of the Trinity.

“He was made man that we might be made God; He revealed Himself through a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; He endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality.” St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation §54

Notice the register of Athanasius's 'that we might.' The incarnation is not an end in itself; it is for us. Everything Christ is, He is on our behalf. This is why every servant must know, in his bones, that the Person he is serving from is not only at the right hand of the Father but also joined to him by grace. We are not acting for an absent God. We are being acted through by a present Lord who has taken our very flesh and refused to put it off again.

Grace Is Not a Thing; It Is His Life in Us

The word 'grace' is used so often in our churches that it can lose its edge. We say it before meals, we sing it in hymns, we recite it in the Lord's letters. It is important, therefore, to recover its real meaning. Grace, in the Scriptures and the Fathers, is not chiefly a substance dispensed by God; it is the very life of God reaching us. It is not a thing He gives; it is His giving of Himself.

“Of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” John 1:16–17, NKJV

'Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.' Grace is not general; it has a personal shape. It comes through Him, because it is Him — His life, His holiness, His Spirit, poured out into the creatures He has taken on Himself. When the Church later speaks of 'divine grace,' she means the very uncreated energies of God, reaching us through the humanity He has assumed.

“The grace of God is not a created thing, nor is it one of His gifts like the other gifts He bestows on creatures. It is God Himself, communicating Himself to the soul that receives Him, as light is communicated from the sun without the sun being lessened thereby.” St. Gregory Palamas, Triads III.1.34 (paraphrased)

For the servant, this matters in the most practical way. When we sit beside a suffering child and pray, we are not rubbing a religious word over a wound and hoping for the best. We are asking the incarnate Lord — who has taken children into His arms, who has wept beside graves, who has Himself suffered — to communicate Himself to that child. Grace is the Lord coming close. The channels of grace that we will examine next are the places He has promised to be close in a particular, knowable way.

The Means of Grace — Where the Lord Has Promised to Meet Us

The Church has always spoken of 'means of grace' — the places where, by His promise, the Lord meets us with His life. These are not the only places He meets us; He is free, and He visits His servants often in ways that surprise us. But the means of grace are the places He has said He will be, and so they are the places the servant returns to, day after day, as reliably as a sick man returns to the medicine that has kept him alive.

The first means of grace is the Word of God. The Lord speaks, and the soul is fed. When we open the Gospels in the morning, we are not performing a ritual; we are being addressed by the same voice that said 'Come and see' by the Jordan. A servant who does not eat the Word daily will find his own words quickly becoming thin in his mouth. The Word is food.

"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" Matthew 4:4, NKJV

The second and crowning means of grace is the Holy Eucharist. Here, the Lord does not only speak to us; He gives us Himself. The bread that we break is truly a partaking of the Body of Christ; the cup of blessing is truly the blood of the New Covenant. St. Cyril of Alexandria speaks of the Eucharist with a bluntness the modern world has forgotten how to say:

"When therefore we eat the holy flesh of Christ, the Saviour of us all, and drink His precious Blood, we have life in us, being made, as it were, one with Him, and dwelling in Him, and having Him dwelling in us." St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John X (on John 6:53)

The third means of grace is prayer — both the formal prayer of the Church and the continual turning of the heart to God that the Fathers call the 'prayer of the heart.' In prayer, grace is not earned; it is received. The servant who prays little receives little, not because the Lord is stingy but because his soul has not opened the channel.

The fourth means of grace is the sacramental life of the Church taken as a whole — baptism, chrismation, confession, unction, matrimony, ordination. Each is a place where the incarnate Lord has promised to be in a particular way. Confession especially, as the previous unit has stressed, is the servant's recurring bath: the place where the grace of baptism is renewed and the conscience is restored.

The fifth means of grace, less often named but indispensable, is the communion of the saints. By the prayers of those who have gone before us — above all by the prayers of the Theotokos — grace reaches us along ancient channels. No servant is alone. No servant's labor is unsupported. We are held up by a cloud of witnesses who love the work the Lord is doing in us and pray for it as though it were their own.

Synergy — The Cooperation of Grace and Freedom

The Orthodox understanding of the Christian life has always been one of synergy — a 'working together' of divine grace and human freedom. The two do not compete. The grace of the Lord does not overwhelm our will; it awakens and heals it. Our cooperation does not earn His grace; it opens us to receive what He is already, of His own love, pouring out.

"For we are God's fellow workers." 1 Corinthians 3:9, NKJV

That phrase, 'fellow workers,' is startling. The God who made the heavens has chosen to do His work in the world together with His creatures. The Lord who could speak new stars into being allows Himself to speak new disciples into being by means of a catechist's patient sentence. This is not a lowering of His glory; it is the very shape of His glory — a love that makes room for the beloved to participate.

For the servant, synergy has a concrete application. It means that we neither collapse into fatalism ('whatever God wills will happen with or without me') nor into activism ('it all depends on me and my effort'). We labor fully, and we trust fully. We work as though everything depended on our fidelity. We pray as though everything depended on Him. And we discover, over time, that both sentences are true at once, because we are dealing with a Lord who has made us His fellow workers.

“God's grace goeth before, and man's will followeth; grace reneweth the will, and the renewed will worketh together with grace. Thus is our salvation accomplished — not by us without Him, lest we grow proud; and not by Him without us, lest we despair of our dignity as persons made for fellowship with Him.” St. Augustine, On Grace and Free Will XV.33 (paraphrased)

A servant who has understood synergy will be a quietly confident servant. He will not take credit for the Lord's work, but he will not hide from the labor either. He will plant, and water, and leave the giving of the growth to the One whose field it actually is.

Obstacles to Grace

Grace is freely given, but it can be blocked. The Lord does not force Himself on any soul. This is important for the servant to understand, both in his own life and in the lives of those he serves. When grace seems not to be flowing, the question is almost never whether the Lord is giving; it is almost always whether we are receiving.

A first obstacle is unrepented sin. Grace cannot fill a vessel whose mouth we have turned to the floor. Confession — honest, specific, regular — is not an act of self-flagellation; it is simply the turning of the vessel upright again.

A second obstacle is distraction. The Lord comes softly. The soul that is perpetually loud with phones and screens and chatter may not be in a condition to hear Him. Silence is not an optional refinement of the spiritual life; it is the condition under which grace makes itself most audible. Every servant needs a daily quarter-hour in which the world is quieted enough for the Lord to speak.

A third obstacle is self-reliance. 'I can handle this' is the most polite way we push the Lord's hand away. The servant who sets out each morning with his own plan, his own wisdom, his own strength, may accomplish much in his own eyes and very little in the eyes of heaven. Humility is not only a private virtue; it is the doorway of grace.

“But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'” James 4:6, NKJV

A fourth obstacle is bitterness against a brother. Our Lord Himself has spoken to this with unusual severity: if we come to the altar and remember that a brother has something against us, we are to leave our gift, go, be reconciled, and then come (Matthew 5:23–24). Bitterness is a clogged pipe. No amount of prayer will open it except the prayer that includes a willingness to forgive.

Living the Fruit — Christ Formed in Us

The test of whether grace is actually flowing in a servant's life is not the intensity of his emotions in prayer or the eloquence of his speech. The test St. Paul gives us is more modest and more honest. It is whether Christ is being formed in us.

“My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you.”
Galatians 4:19, NKJV

That is the shape of fruitfulness. Over the long years of a servant's life, the Lord who was born in Bethlehem and lived in Nazareth is slowly formed inside the servant. His patience becomes ours. His kindness becomes ours. His willingness to be interrupted becomes ours. His tears for Jerusalem become ours. This forming is so gradual that we hardly notice it in ourselves; others, however, begin to notice it, and they come to us because they sense Him in us, even when we do not sense Him there.

The fruit, when it appears, has the unmistakable shape the Apostle sketched for the Galatians.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Galatians 5:22–23, NKJV

This is how Christology becomes concrete in our lives. The same Lord who was incarnate in Galilee is now, by grace, being incarnate, in a more modest way, in every servant's small daily yes. We are becoming the means by which His gentleness touches a restless classroom, His longsuffering endures a difficult parish meeting, His kindness reaches a weary old mother in the back pew. This is what the end of the curriculum has been aiming at all along.

May the Lord who took flesh for us never withdraw from us the life He has joined to ours. May He keep us close to the means He has given: His Word, His Table, His prayer, His sacraments, the company of His saints. May He make us faithful in the small daily act of cooperation with His grace, and may He one day find us, at the end of our race, not only serving Him, but bearing within us His own face, traced in us by the slow and patient work of His own Spirit. To Him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Review Questions

1. St. Irenaeus wrote, 'He became what we are, that He might make us what He Himself is.' What does this statement of the Incarnation mean for us — and how does it change our understanding of what a servant is actually doing when he serves?

2. Grace is not a created thing but the very life of God reaching us. How does this recovered definition of grace change the way we pray, the way we approach the sacraments, and the way we speak of the Christian life to those we serve?
3. Of the five means of grace named in this lesson (Word, Eucharist, prayer, the sacramental life, the communion of saints), which one is most fully present in our weekly rhythm, and which one is most in need of recovery?
4. Synergy names the cooperation of grace and freedom. Where in our own service are we tempted to tip into fatalism ('whatever God wills will happen') or into activism ('it all depends on me'), and how does the truth of synergy steady us?
5. The lesson names four obstacles to grace: unrepented sin, distraction, self-reliance, and bitterness against a brother. Which of these is currently most at work in our own soul, and what one concrete step can we take this week to begin to clear it?
6. St. Paul says he labored until Christ was formed in his spiritual children. What small evidences of Christ being 'formed' have we begun to notice, with gratitude, in ourselves — and where do we still long for His likeness to grow?
7. As Unit 3 closes the Pre-Servants curriculum, what is the single promise or discipline we most want to carry forward from this book into the life of service that lies ahead of us?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. Athanasius the Apostolic, *On the Incarnation of the Word*. Translated by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Sister Penelope Lawson).
- St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1.
- St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Books IX–X (on John 6).
- St. Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*. Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, *On Grace and Free Will*. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 5.
- Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, chapters on the Incarnation, grace, and synergy.
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way*, selections on the means of grace.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning. The Palamas paraphrase follows the substance of Triads III.1.

Lesson Notes

End of the Curriculum

And so the road closes. Twenty-eight lessons, three units, eight sections, written in one voice and offered to every servant who picks up this book in the hope of being formed a little more into the image of the One he serves. The first lesson began with the Good Shepherd; the last ends with the means of grace by which Christ Himself is formed in us. Between the two is the whole road — foundations, struggles, sources, discipleship, challenges, the contemporary air, sacrifice, and fruit. No one will walk this road all at once. The book is meant to be returned to, slowly, over years, as the servant's own life catches up with its pages.

The reader is invited to take this book as a companion rather than a judge. Read slowly. Take one lesson a week. Sit with the Review Questions. Let the Books & References suggest the next year of deeper reading. Keep the Lesson Notes pages, and write in them honestly. The book is not meant to make us feel inadequate; it is meant to help us, alongside the Fathers and the saints, become ourselves servants who can be used by the Lord for whatever small portion of His flock He entrusts to us.

May the Lord who opened His own ministry at the feet of His disciples, who walked the second mile from the manger to the grave and beyond it, who asked His restored disciple only whether he loved Him — may He accept this book as a small offering placed on His altar. May He use it to form servants in whose hearts His name is a quiet, steady fire. May He make the whole Pre-Servants program fruitful for many generations of His children. And may every reader who closes this book finally be found, at the end, among those whom our Lord calls friends, because we have come to know what our Master is doing (John 15:15). To Him, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Resurrection and the Life, the Vine in whom we are the branches, and the One who has called us first servants and then, wonderfully, friends — be all glory, honor, and worship, together with His Father who is without beginning, and the Holy and life-giving Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.