



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

December 2016

Dear beloved,

Peace and grace.

I would like to talk to you today about being leaders in your spiritual lives.

In Philippians we read, *‘Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.’*¹ Here, Saint Paul, who was, at the time, imprisoned in Rome, was reminding the Philippians that a true servant is one who obeys in the absence of his master; this he said with assurance in their good will and then implored them to continue to do good works as God always ‘works with the willing.’² I would like for us to become the recipients of this letter and to see how we can live by the blessed words of the Apostle.

When we live continually in the presence of God and work out our own salvation in the fear of God, we can truly be considered fruitful leaders of our spiritual lives. Therefore, let us look into the characteristics of such a leader – one who has wisdom, who is emotionally strong and has the ability to endure, who first lives by the example s/he teaches, who is a true servant, and who above all has great love for everyone.

We should seek to have wisdom. *‘The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom’*³ and ‘no one will be strong enough to overpower the soul that is nailed down by the fear of God, because to be nailed down is to be more securely fastened than to be rooted. In fact, the prophet prayed for this when he said, “Nail my flesh with your fear.”’⁴ A good leader always walks in the fear of God and uses wisdom to discern between what is right and wrong in order not to break a vow or a commandment. We should learn from King Solomon who, before the beginning of his leadership, prayed for wisdom; but in our case we do not seek wisdom in order to judge others, but rather that we may adequately judge our own thoughts and actions. Therefore, *‘If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God,*

¹ Phil. 2: 12-13

² Chrysostom, “Homily on Philippians,” in John Chrysostom. *Interpretatio omnium epistularum Paulinarum*. Edited by F. Field. (Oxford: Clarendon), 1849-1862, quoted in Mark J. Edwards, ed., *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Ancient Christian Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 258.

³ Prov. 9:10

⁴ Chrysostom, “Homilies on the Gospel of John 54,” in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), quoted in Quentin F. Wesselschmidt ed., *Psalms 51-150, Ancient Christian Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 334.

*who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.*⁵

We should not be driven by our emotions. *‘The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent man ignores an insult.’*⁶ How often have we regretted our reactions when faced with something trying? Making decisions based on our emotions is a behavior unbecoming a leader. Our hurt and frustration should never affect our faithfulness towards our responsibilities - *‘Observe now first of all that rational judgment is sovereign over the emotions by virtue of the restraining power of self-control.’*⁷ We often get defensive when we feel criticized, or at times we even “cover all bases” by defending ourselves before anyone has a chance to say anything negative about us! Rather than doing this, let us follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who remained silent in times of trial – *‘See how many things they testify against You!’ But Jesus still answered nothing, so that Pilate marveled.*⁸ Our Lord Jesus Christ was never quick to react to anything, *‘but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously’.*⁹

We should live by example. *‘Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.’*¹⁰ Do our actions always please and glorify God or are they sometimes done for our own pleasure and glory? Do our actions speak louder than our words or are we simply good preachers who do not practice what we preach? Can we truly say, *‘Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ’*¹¹ or are our actions found wanting? My beloved, *‘You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?’*¹² How can we justify ever being hurt or offended by others, when we ourselves do the very same shameful things? Ah! But our memory is always sharp when it comes to remembering the wrongs others have done to us and ever so weak when it comes to remembering our own mistakes. In the past, the saints fled from glory and eagerly accepted the cross, but nowadays we more often search for the things that will give us praise and shun the cross. If we do this, and are troubled when things seem difficult, then why do we expect so much of others? In any case, our faithfulness to God is not contingent on the behavior of others – whether they do or do not do – it is between us and God alone and instead of wasting time observing others, we should be the good example ourselves.

We should be true servants. *‘Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.’*¹³ Consider, our Lord Jesus Christ who came to us *‘taking the form of a bondservant’*¹⁴ in perfect obedience to His Heavenly Father and earthly family. Although God, He did not live amongst us as an authoritative man but as a true servant, always there in times of need, never asking anything of us which He did not

⁵ Jas. 1:5

⁶ Prov. 12:16 RSV

⁷ 4 Macc. 1: 30 RSV

⁸ Mark 15:4, 5

⁹ 1 Pet. 2:23

¹⁰ Matt. 5:16

¹¹ 1 Cor. 11:1

¹² Rom. 2:23

¹³ Mark 10:43-45

¹⁴ Phil. 2:7

first do, perfectly Himself. A leader should not be afraid of being humble, as though such a thing would be a threat. Pharaoh did not feel threatened by Joseph, and by this Egypt became the most powerful country in the world. Saul, on the other hand, was very threatened by David and so lost everything, which he otherwise would not have. ‘Before He humbled himself, only the angels knew Him. After He humbled Himself, all human nature knew Him. You see how His humbling of Himself did not make Him have less but produced countless benefits, countless deeds of virtue, and made His glory shine forth with greater brightness. God wants for nothing and has need of nothing. Yet, when He humbled Himself, He produced such great good, increased His household, and extended His kingdom. Why, then, are you afraid that you will become less if you humble yourself?’¹⁵

My beloved, *‘fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.’*¹⁶ Let your obedience and your good works be done in the presence of God and not for the sake of man. Be a good leader in your spiritual life for the sake of your salvation, not for the sake of your elders. Be wise and humble, be strong and a good example and *‘above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.”*¹⁷ May we all become the image of our Lord Jesus Christ and follow His perfect example.

May the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹⁵ Chrysostom, “On the Incomprehensible Nature of God 8,” in *Homilies Against the Anomeans*, OJCJ 8.2, 253–54. Without his humiliation, only the angels would have known his identity. Humility produces surprising fruit in unexpected places, quoted in Thomas C Oden; Christopher A. Hall, ed., *Mark (Revised)*, Ancient Christian Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 151.

¹⁶ Phil. 2:2

¹⁷ 1 Pet. 4:8