

I Only Know That I Am A Sinner

A present day monk tells the following story: "I was once walking with a very pious and humble man, when we were stopped on the street by an old man distributing small pamphlets. The old man asked us, 'Are you saved? Have you accepted Jesus?' "My humble companion said, 'I only know that I am a sinner.'

"The old man answered my friend: 'Jesus has saved me. I have the assurance of his salvation. I have conquered pride, lust and sin. Praise God.'

"At these words, my companion very abruptly grabbed me by the arm, saying to the old man, 'Leave us alone.' But as we walked my humble friend began to cry bitterly. Embarrassed that others were watching, he controlled himself.

"I asked him: 'Why are you crying like this?'

"He quietly answered, 'As that man told us that, a strange voice in my mind translated his words, so that he said, "I have saved myself. I have assured myself. Pride, lust and sin no longer bother me, for they have conquered me. God must praise me." The mere thought of his soul crushed me. God forgive us all.'"

The pride of the old man had blinded his soul from the truth about himself. The one thing the pious man knew was that he was a sinner. Having an awareness of being sinful is the catalyst to repentance. Without it, the risk is that no struggle against sin is necessary. Satan has deluded a soul when it thinks it has reached perfection. All the saints have attested to the opposite taking place. The closer they drew near to God's holiness the more aware of their utter sinfulness they became.

St. Paul continually reminded the early Christians to remain vigilant in their struggle against sin. Such a struggle was inevitable because of the condition of humanity:
. . . But I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Romans 7:14-15)

Being sold under sin is interpreted by the Fathers as being in a state of mortality. After the fall, humanity was changed by sin and became subject to death. Human beings are spiritual and physical (carnal). The will or the ability of "self determination" must act as a king in order that a proper order be kept. The mind is the King of the soul and body which directs our actions. By struggling against the passions, the will is strengthened to resist sin.

Someone who is not yet spiritual will be defeated in instances like these, even against his own will, because that will is not yet strong or resilient enough to retain control of him to the point of death in his struggle for the Truth. (Origen)

If the need for repentance is taken away, the will grows weaker and weaker and becomes a slave of the passions.

Pentecost has come again upon the Church; the gift of the Holy Spirit is sent to strengthen Christians in this struggle:

The Lord said to His friends: I shall not leave as orphans all you whom I have gathered; but rather I shall send forth the Holy Spirit unto you . . . to guide and establish your souls. (Pentecostarion)

Christians are established in the will of God when guided by the Holy Spirit. God's will finds fulfillment in the following ways:

1.) The Holy Spirit teaches us what to say during times of attack (Luke 12:12). As one is brought before the "rulers" of our time, the anti-Christian ideologies of materialism and self-love, the Holy Spirit gives us a response if we are willing to hear it.

2.) The Holy Spirit brings to our remembrance the Word of Christ (John 14:26). Our Lord has given a teaching for every imaginable situation. The Holy Spirit illumines the conscience to remember what is right and what is wrong.

3.) The Holy Spirit gives us power to become witnesses of Christ (Acts 1:8). Ultimately, the purpose of life for the Christian is to reveal Christ to others. Christians are co-workers with the Holy Spirit, Who reveals Christ to the entire world.

4.) The Holy Spirit fills us with unending joy (Romans 14:17). Serving God, living for His Kingdom, seeking fulfillment in Christ not in food and drink is the soil which brings forth the joy of the Holy Spirit.

5.) The Holy Spirit sanctifies us with the grace of God (Romans 15:16). Christians become partakers in the divine nature of Christ as the Holy Spirit comes upon the mysteries of the Church. Holy Communion, Holy Oil, Holy Water and Confession all serve to make us partakers in God's Holiness.

6.) The Holy Spirit teaches us to pray (Jude 1:20). We do not know how to pray as we ought. The Holy Spirit teaches us to pray as Christ did.

The next time someone asks whether you are saved, remember the words of the pious man: "I only know that I am a sinner." We are sinners in need of salvation. Christ gives us salvation on the Cross, yet we must accept the Cross and die to sin if we are to share in His Resurrection.

May our Lord and Savior, Who sent the Holy Spirit upon His disciples and through them upon His Church, bless us all to sing:

Thy good Spirit shall lead me in the land of uprightness. Alleluia.

+ Fr. Andrew Barakos