

St. Paul begins this morning's Epistle reading, a letter to the Christians of Corinth, with a plea-"We then as workers together with Him (Christ), beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor. 6:1). The Corinthian Christians are workers together with Paul and the Apostles with Christ; all sent out (which is the meaning of the word 'apostle') into the world to gather the harvest. The Church is sent into the world to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost, and to gather them into the fold of Christ. This also is our task-it's not only the duty of the priest to share the Gospel, and to make a way for people to come to know Christ, and to become members of His Holy Church. This is duty laid on all of us by Christ; since we are possessors of the Truth, we have an obligation to share that Truth with others.

But for most of us, who are not ordained as members of the clergy to perform this task in the Churches, we sometimes wonder exactly how it is that we carry the Gospel to the world. St. Paul really answered that question in last Sunday's Epistle-we carry always in our flesh the dying of Christ. In other words, by our lives, by our words, and by our actions we carry Christ into the world. In the New Testament there's even mention of people wanting to hear about Christ because they wondered what was so different about these people who were Christians. By their presence, by their lives, the Christians witnessed to the Resurrection and to the defeat of sin and hell and death. St. Paul, this morning, gives us a bit of list that paints for us at least a partial picture of what a life that would call others to Christ might look like. A picture of the life that we're striving to as well. We certainly can't mention all of these things, but we can make a beginning.

The bar is set high; St. Paul writes, "Giving no offense in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed" (2 Cor. 6:3). So the goal is that our lives would never offend (this refers not only to not offending the people around us, but most importantly, that our lives never offend the word of God, that we live consistent with what we preach). And this is our aim, so that the ministry of the Gospel be not blamed. Throughout the ages, Christians have not done such a good job with this-many people today refuse to be Christians because of the actions of Christians in the past, and because of the failings of Christians today. One of the main reasons people don't consider Christ, and the most damning reason for the Church, is because of us, the lives of Christians drive people away from Christ. I know I've used this example before, but it's terribly powerful-Ghandi was very attracted to the Christian faith, but he said he would never consider conversion because no Christian he knew actually lived the commandments of Christ, and many didn't even try. This is exactly what St. Paul's addressing in this verse-our lives are not to cause offense, because that sin will do harm to the preaching of the Gospel. Christ says, "Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea" (Mark 9:42). Whether we cause a weaker brother to stumble, or we cause someone outside of the Church never to seek salvation in Christ, we've caused a little one to falter-and we hear what Christ says would be better.

St. Paul then goes on to list some positive attributes of a life well-pleasing to God, a life that will

further the ministry, and not harm it. [Again, we can't mention everything.] The first thing he mentions is patience. We get in more trouble because of our impatience than perhaps anything else. Of course, impatience often comes from our pride and our judging others. But we have to learn to be patient. Be patient with God-His timeline, His ways, are not ours, and impatience with God is a grave sin, because it's essentially not trusting in God. Be patient with others-we have to learn to let other people be themselves. One of the greatest helps I ever heard here was the idea of having no expectations for other people. If we don't expect someone else to do or say or be what we want, then our temptations to be impatient with them for failing will be greatly reduced. Be patient with ourselves-for our entire lives we'll be works in progress. If we insist on controlling this work, then the results will always be disastrous. If we allow God to control our lives, then as He wills and as we cooperate, we'll get to the places He wants us to be.

St. Paul then gives part of a list, and in other verses he expands on the idea, that in hard times (afflictions, distress, prison, punishment, sickness), in hard times we don't grumble against God. This is obviously related to patience, that we understand that all things rest in the hands of an Almighty God. If it happens, for good or for bad, He knows it, and He's chosen to allow it. The Prophet Isaiah reminds us, "His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways" (Isaiah 55:8). This is one of the most difficult spiritual victories of the Christian life, to receive all things as from the hand of God. A dear friend of mine often says that the strongest word we're given to help us in these difficult times, is to remember that God won't give us more than we can bear. To remember this, and to believe it. To pray with the father of the demon possessed boy, "Lord I believe, help Thou my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

In this reading, St. Paul also mentions other virtues that we're to acquire as followers of Christ: such as spiritual labors, watching (watchfulness, the Fathers say, that we're attentive to the movements of our body and soul so we can stamp out sin and strive for godliness), fasting, purity (of body, of mind, of thoughts, of actions, purity of life in every regard), knowledge (knowledge of God which comes from study, but even more from prayer and from living the way of Christ), longsuffering, kindness, unfeigned love.

This calling St. Paul lays on us as Christians this morning is very exalted, it's a difficult road, and one that we fail to achieve time and time again. Which is why he begins this reading the way he does-"we...beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain" (v1). He's imploring us that we don't allow the grace of God to come to us for nothing; that we don't waste the grace that God pours out on us in Christ through the Holy Spirit. We receive God's grace in so many ways-the grace of our baptism, the grace of our chrismation, the grace of Holy Communion. We also receive grace, the Fathers teach, every time we approach God-in Church, in prayer, in good works. God pours out His grace on us to be used, so that we're strengthened in faith and in works, so that we work together with God for all good things.

So struggle to preserve the grace of this service, the grace of this Holy Communion (this participation in the life and the mercy of God), and carry this grace with you into the world, being strengthened both in your own life in Christ (strengthened to become what St. Paul has described), and then bringing that light to others in the world as well.

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!