

Our Epistle and Gospel lesson, in addition to the collect for this morning, direct us to consider the generous gifts of God. James says in the epistle, every good gift and every perfect gift is from above. Every good and perfect thing which we have is from the Lord. In fact, God only gives good and perfect gifts. It is valuable at any time to take stock of the wonderful generosity of God towards us. He has bestowed on each of us such immeasurable grace. Oftentimes the most fundamental things which we take for granted, are to us the sources of greatest joy. Food and fellowship, times of rest and times of celebration, the ability to opportunity to work and most of all the ability to pray. These are some of God's greatest gifts. Our disposition toward them ought to be shaped by gratitude. We should truly embrace the words of the Lord's prayer, acknowledging he is the source of our daily bread. Each of these mundane and ordinary things are demonstrative of God's goodness and love.

But much more than these considerations, the propers this morning direct us to contemplate the nature of God's greatest gift – Union with himself.

The collect for this morning is one of the richest and most instructive of the entire church year. In this collect we ask God to order our unruly wills and affections, so that we may love His commandments and desire His promises. We recognize that this is something only God has the capacity to do, and that having accomplished this, we receive the gift of true Joy despite the trials and changes of this life.

What we are directed to consider, here, is that God's greatest gift involves the ability to love those other things which he has given. God is able to conform our wills to his will and our desires to his promises. In this way, we cannot help but be blessed, for our delight will be guided by the very one who directs the course of the world. This is not some domineering expression of God's power, such that he makes all his children automotons who only parrot and applaud his actions. Rather, it is more like developing a taste for something truly good. For example, when I was young I did not like coffee. I could not get past the bitterness and had no interest in trying. However, over time, I was given the opportunity to taste and smell some very delicious coffee beverages, and eventually developed a taste for it. Now, it is a whole new avenue of delightful things which has opened up to me. And, in part, those people who brought me along in my appreciation are responsible for these new delights which I experience.

As God directs us toward a delight in his commandments and promises, we are given access to entire worlds of joy and comfort which are otherwise closed to us. This is the work of the comforter. In transforming the people of God into images of Christ, by filling us with the life of Christ, and by making our desires and ambitions conform to the will of God, the Holy Ghost completes the work of salvation which Christ accomplished. Jesus in our gospel says that it is to the Apostles' advantage that he go. How could that be? What great comfort and joy they must have experienced by the companionship of Jesus. How much easier must it have been to physically follow Christ and do the things that he was doing? In difficult situations, they only needed to follow Christ's lead. And with his ascension to prepare a place in heaven, his disciples would be left to try and figure out for themselves how to live a Christian life. The practical day to day responsibilities of following Jesus seem so much harder to discern.

However, while our Lord was with his people on the earth, they may have found it easy to follow him physically, but their spiritual understanding remained darkened. They acted rightly, following the lead of their teacher, but they did not grasp why the Lord did what he did. The apostles may have found it easier to be externally righteous, but they were not internally transformed and lightened. Therefore, Christ says it is to their advantage that he go. For with his departure and the coming of the Holy Ghost, those external acts which they observed and in which they participated were drawn into their very souls. The

physical body of Christ departed from them, but the Holy Spirit came upon them to transform each one of them into living examples of Christ's life.

This remains the progression of many Christians today. We begin by participating externally in activities which we understand to be good and emblematic of the Christian. We attend church, participate in prayers, recite a statement of faith such as the creed, read our Bible, attempt to act generously with those around us, even try to forgive offenses and lay down our desires for others. Perhaps, we were compelled to do these things as children. Our parents brought us to church and required us to behave kindly. We begin, like the Apostles, by physically following the Christian life, enacting in our lives the processes of Jesus and the believers around us.

And as we grow, as the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts, he begins the process of transformation. Jesus describes this process as being convinced of Sin, of Righteousness, and of Judgement. The Holy Spirit first convicts us of sin. We come to recognize the wickedness of our inclinations and selfish actions. For each of us this conviction will be done differently. The Spirit works within each of God's children in a manner particular to each. However, he will show us our failure, if we will allow it. The Holy Spirit will reveal to us our Sin just as Jesus began with the woman at the well. He asked her to go call her husband, and after hearing her say she had no husband, he told her, "Thou hast well said, I have no husband: for thou hast had five husbands, and he whom thou now hast, is not thy husband: in this saidst thou truly." Jesus begins with the conviction of sin, that by repentance she may begin to be transformed and become one of his followers. And this woman soon after, "she left her water-pot, and went her way into the city, and saith to the men, Come, and see a man that told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" She sees and recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, because she has been convicted of sin and is ready to repent. This is the first step of the transformation that the Holy Spirit enacts.

Next, the Spirit reproves of righteousness. Having repented of sin, it is needful that the sin be replaced with the righteousness of Christ. It is not sufficient that the Old man be put off, but that the New man be put on, as well, in the words of Paul. We are not to be empty shells, but filled with the life of The Spirit, bearing all the fruits thereof. Our minds are to be set on heavenly things, and our affections transported with the risen and ascended Lord. Just as Jesus left this earth to ascend to heaven, our desires and ambitions are to leave this world behind, and ascend with Christ into the heavenly places. The Holy Spirit awakes in us a desire for the things of God, and we are nourished and delighted by the Fruits of the Spirit. Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-control. These become the focus of our desires. The Righteousness of Christ dwells within our hearts and we are renewed from within. We move from being motivated primarily by a desire to avoid the guilt and shame of sin, and begin to be motivated by a longing for righteousness. We begin to say with the Psalmist, "And I will delight myself In thy commandments, which I have loved. My hands also will I lift up unto thy commandments, which I have loved; And I will meditate in thy statutes. Remember the word unto thy servant, Upon which thou hast caused me to hope."

Lastly, Our Lord says that the Spirit will convict of Judgement. George Whitefield described this conviction: "By the word judgment, I understand that well-grounded peace, that settled judgment, which the soul forms of itself, when it is enabled by the Spirit of God to lay hold on Christ's righteousness... The soul being now justified by faith, has peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and can triumphantly say, It is Christ that justifies me, who is he that condemns me? The strong man armed is now cast out; my soul is in a true peace; the Prince of this world will come and accuse, but he

has now no share in me: the blessed Spirit which I have received, and whereby I am enabled to apply Christ's righteousness to my poor soul, powerfully convinces me of this: why should I fear? Or of what shall I be afraid, since God's Spirit witnesses with my spirit, that I am a child of God? The Lord is ascended up on high; he has led captivity captive; he has received the Holy Ghost the Comforter, that best of gifts for men: and that Comforter is come into my heart: he is faithful that hath promised: I, even I, am powerfully, rationally, spiritually convicted of sin, righteousness and judgment. By this I know the Prince of this world is judged."

This is the transformation which Christ describes, and which we pray for in our Collect. God orders the wills of men by the work of the Spirit. We are drawn away from a desire for sin and into a desire for God himself, and the Joy which we receive as a result carries us through the changes and trials of our life in the world. We have the peace which comes from a conviction of judgement and the righteousness of Christ.

We often in our lives have a sense that the strongest Christian is the one who makes the hardest decision in following God. The more difficult it is to follow God, the more virtuous the faithful follower must be. This seems to be the implication of Christ's teaching. In the sermon on the mount, he took the already at times difficult ten commandments and added to them. Lust is equivalent to adultery, Hatred is equivalent to murder. And in his conversation with the rich young ruler, Jesus seemed determined to select the hardest possible thing to require of the man. Sell all you have and give it to the poor. And we are called not only to love our neighbor, but love our enemies? Surely, the most righteous thing, is also the most difficult.

However, this is a misunderstanding. As St. Thomas wrote, "it is not the difficulty of loving one's enemy that matters... if love were to be so perfected that the difficulty vanished altogether, it would be more meritorious still." The strongest and most mature Christian is one who begins to find a righteous life easier and easier. Not because he is greater in himself, but because he is being transformed into the likeness of Christ. We are not doomed as Christians to an eternity of doing things we find taxing and strained. We are committed to a life we know to be good, and which will become increasingly delightful to us, as we live in it.

Do not grow weary of well-doing, my friends. For we have set our sights on true Joy. And even though we may find it difficult now, the glory which shall be ours will be of so great a delight, the diseased half-pleasures which the world offers will not even enter our thoughts. There will be ups and downs in this life – times that we find our duty to be easy and light, and times when it feels as though we are carrying a cross up a mountain to die. However, as we approach heaven, and as we are transformed by the Holy Ghost, we will find greater delight in the things of God, and the ups and downs of this life will be unable to shatter the Peace which He gives.