

Abundant Life
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How is God Known?

We see that a truly Orthodox understanding of the term “Christian morality” is that it is not a summary of the behavior of Christians, but rather the ideal life shown to us by Jesus Christ. Christian morality does not reflect us; we are called to reflect it. It is something eternal and unchangeable; and our problem, our great difficulty, is to live according to this ideal moral life.

Many people say it is impossible to live a completely moral life. ‘Man is only human,’ is the common excuse for not trying very hard. The Orthodox Christian, however, does try hard; he refuses to accept a fatalistic attitude in the moral realm. He can even cite proof that moral perfection is possible: the lives of saints. If there were no saints perhaps all men would have an excuse for joining the ranks of the pessimists (though God’s moral ideal would still stand, and everyone would be called to follow it). But there are examples of people in every age including our own who approached perfection, the saints, both known and unknown.

The question, however, that the pessimists are always posing is: how do you know all of this religious literature is true? How do you know someone did not just fabricate these stories about the saints, the lives of John the Baptist, the Virgin, and even Christ? And finally god Himself could He be nothing more than the creation of man’s mind, the personification of people’s hopes and dreams, but certainly not a person living somewhere in the sky. Is it possible that man created religion just as he creates poems and novels and music and computers and TV sets? How do we really know God exists and has a will and wants us to live in a certain way??

One day Jesus Christ told the Pharisees (the scoffers and pessimists of their day) a story about a rich man who died and went to hell. The man had been unconcerned about the future while he lived because he had everything he desired. Nearby lived a poor man, Lazarus, who had nothing. He died too, and went to heaven. The rich man in hell, in torment, could see Lazarus in paradise. He asked for Lazarus to come and comfort him, but it was impossible. So he asked him then if he could at least go to his brothers still on earth and warn them to prepare for the future life. The answer from Abraham was: They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” But the rich man answered, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” Abraham retorts: “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

The Experience of God

Until Christ comes again in glory there will always be scoffers telling us that the Bible and the lives of saints are all imaginary, the products of primitive minds and superstition. Yet we Christians believe these sources to be witnesses of genuine experiences of God. The Old Testament, for example, has never been titled “A History of the Jews.” Nor the New Testament “A History of the Early Christians.” Even the book of Acts, a historical book, entitled the “Acts of the Apostles.” These books are not simply historical accounts, but ‘testaments’ in the fullest sense. They testify to the experiences of countless generations of human beings. What makes them more than history is that in each experience, no matter how ordinary or extra-ordinary, these people saw something more than just the event. They say into their own experiences, behind and beyond them. They saw the Spirit and the will and the Presence of God behind all external events. They had Moses and the Prophets, *and they heard them.*

Why was it, though, that so few people became Christ’s disciples while He was on earth? “Multitudes” listened to Him; thousands were fed in a miraculous way by Him. He healed many incurable diseases. He even raised the dead to life. Why then did not the whole world fall at His feet? And why at the most crucial moment in His life did the inner core of twelve desert Him and one even betray Him?

The answer is the same as that which keeps people from following Him today. They could not see beyond the externals. They saw a man, and forgot He was the Son of God. So the scoffers today see in Christ a man, a good one, even an ingenious one, but only a man. And the Bible is seen as nothing more than a piece of literature. They miss the whole testimony to the inner meaning of who Christ was and what He did; and they miss the point that the scriptures and lives of the saints uncover the presence of God who is “everywhere and fills all things.”

For two thousand years now we have had Moses, the Prophets, and the fulfillment of their prophecies: Christ. And numberless Christ-like saints have spoken to us by their lives. At this very moment, in fact, there are saints on earth, people whose identifying characteristics are those outlined in the Sermon on the Mount: humble, merciful, pure in heart, joyous, and often...persecuted. More than that, the rich man in hell should rejoice, for one has already risen from the dead to show us the reality of God and His Kingdom. But as the Risen One Himself predicted, they are still not convinced.

The Inner Meaning of Moral Life

We have seen the necessity for accepting the witness of others in establishing a divine ideal of life. In religious language this is called *faith*. St. Paul calls faith: “the conviction of things not seen.” He explains that it is “by faith we understand that the world was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear” (Heb. 11:1-3). We might then call faith a “vision of the unseen,” and having such a vision we can know what lies behind men and events and, in fact, the whole universe. Jesus Christ, although He could be seen and touched, nevertheless still had a

“hidden divinity” which was not apparent to the physical eye but only to those with an interior eye of faith. Everything He did and said revealed God to those who were seeking God, to those whose hearts were open. But to the ones with still necks and hard hearts, He appeared to be only a man.

The whole pattern of Christian life, therefore, following the example of Christ, is “hidden and revealed,” or one might say spirit and flesh. The moral aspects of this life are no exception; they include both spirit and flesh. If we were only spirit, we would be angels. If we were only flesh then the pessimists would be right; life would end at our physical death, and there would be no point in living morally. We would simply eat and drink and seek pleasure and die. The world today proclaims this unhappy viewpoint with the result that many people live in constant despair with no meaning to any part of their lives beyond day to day satisfaction of appetites. Even in the United States where most people are baptized Christians, the public has been labeled with a single descriptive word: consumer. Our society is rapidly forgetting the hidden aspect of man, his spirit.

The reality, however, proclaimed by Orthodox Christianity to all ages and all nations is that men are flesh and spirit, the two inseparable in every human person. No matter how many people fail to recognize evidence of spiritual life, there is still no such thing as a spiritless person. There are only those who, like the rich man, are occupied all the while with the feasts of physical world, too busy to notice that God has prepared for us an eternal feast in His Kingdom. It is His will that we change from mere consumers of earthly food, to recipients of the food of eternity.

All of human life, therefore, from an Orthodox Christian standpoint is seen as a preparation. We are, in the words of the early Christian writers, sojourners, travelers passing from one life to another. The Church is a ship, sailing through the storms of the world which ignores and actively rejects teaching of God, Christ and the saints. That is why Christ spoke of casting fire on the earth, not because He hates it, but the opposite, because He loves it. His fire is one of forgiveness and patience and cleansing the sojourners. His plan is a plan of saving, not condemning the world.

The Enemy

Why is the moral life so difficult to achieve? If God has such great plans for men, why does He not see to it that they are accomplished? The world today hardly recognizes even the existence of God, and much less follows His extremely demanding moral program. Why is this so? Why does He seem so hidden while the world continues its wars, its assassinations, its hatreds?

Speaking to the crowds by the sea, Jesus told a parable which illuminates these questions. He compared the Kingdom of Heaven to a man planting seed in a field. The field is the world, and while men sleep the ‘enemy’ comes and plants weeds in the field. As soon as the plants begin to grow, there are weeds growing alongside. When the servants of the planter ask where the weeds have come from, he answers, “an enemy has done this.” (Matt. 13:24-28).

There is throughout the New Testament constant reference to an enemy; the whole Bible in fact refers to the enemy and enemies of God. Read through the Psalms, for example, and not how often 'the enemy' appears. In our own time, on the other hand, it has become unfashionable to speak of the enemy, the devil, as a person. That glaring character with horns, a pitchfork and arrowed tail wearing red pajamas is simply not acceptable today. He was the fabrication of Medieval superstition. No modern man can seriously believe such a thing exists. Evil exists, of course, but it is simply man's own doing, his mistakes, his greed, and his maladjustment.

But the Christ, just as he believes the source of goodness is not himself, but above him, so the source of evil is beyond man; it is specifically a very powerful being attracting man away from God. Sometimes, as in the incident of Christ's temptation, the devil appears as a man, looking quite normal and speaking with apparent kindness and concern (Matt. 4 and Luke 3). In our lives he comes to us sometimes in the form of a flesh and blood person too; that is the person is not the devil, but for one reason or another he has volunteered to serve the devil's purpose. That purpose, to repeat, is to draw man away from God. It is clear then that the devil cannot be an ugly figure. On the contrary, he is a darkly handsome figure. Sin, the act of disconnecting ourselves from God, is more often than not at least initially attractive. But if one persists in sin, it soon becomes bitter.

The devil, however, does not always appeal to us through others. Sometimes he appeals directly to our hearts, and this is most dangerous, for we then can become his volunteers and turn not only ourselves but others away from God. This is nothing else than the coming to growth of those weeds planted by the enemy. The result is that God's plans are not accomplished in men, and the world is not released from its wars and hatreds. Every time we hate or gossip or envy or lie or are proud or angry or lewd or greedy, we are serving the devil and furthering the domain of hell. The outcome of such 'service' is death, both physical and spiritual, there is no hope and certainly no happiness.

The alternative to death is, of course, life, and that is what we understand to be the whole point of morality. Living morally is really *living*, and its end cannot involve death. Rather, it has no end, but opens into a new transformed life with Christ calls 'eternal.' The inner meaning of Christian morality is now clearer: the moral life is a life which transforms human creatures headed for death into divine beings headed for eternity. In being moral we are not following blindly this or that restriction. We are not straight-jacketed into a joyless, grey life. We understand life as a preparation, traveling in a new direction toward divine life, and along the way receiving a taste of the joy which does not pass as the sun sets. We are invited to enter the light of the day which knows no evening.