

The Secrets of Great Lent
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Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see who Jesus was (Luke 19:1-10). It wasn't enough merely to know (or even "believe" for that matter!) that a Jesus Christ exists alive: such so-called knowledge and belief is, by itself, quite sterile and fruitless and even vain. Unless a man looks, unless a man tries, unless he climbs and maybe falls yet looks again—he will never "see who Jesus is" really. Jesus preached that each and every person could live life in a new and wonderful way: filled and inspired with peace and joy, faith and love, kindness and gentleness. Yet—and this is one of the solid truths of the true faith—God never barges in on someone who does not want to see Him. Only I can look, only I can climb, only I can want, only I can decide radically what God wants me to be. Jesus said that He could do things with me, for me, in me—but neither He nor I will ever know unless I let him try.

The one who humbles himself will be exalted, etc. (Luke 18:10-14). Or: the difference between merely doing good and really being good. Jesus never said that God wants a person to do only the right things, the proper things, the correct things, and so be satisfied with himself. The Pharisee did all of these, yet the point is that he did not learn how to live really, especially with other men. Jesus preached that in Him all men are brothers: this "righteous" man never learned this in life. So I may never have done one good thing in life—yet I can still and always imitate the saintly sinner, the publican: I must only never become proud or indifferent or stuck-up in the way I act with other people. This much I can do, and Jesus "justifies" me, i.e. He does the rest. He will slowly (sometimes it seems, painfully so) teach me the way to really be good naturally, by myself in Him.

This My Son was dead, and is alive (Luke 15:11-32). People usually think of God as being everything except human. God, they say, "can't know how hard life can be sometimes." Tears, pain, and laughs. Words too hastily spoken. Friendships gained and friendships lost. Things thoughtlessly done. Small and great joys, great and small sorrows. Loves and hates and who knows what! In all of this—LIFE!—who am I? Only I can find out, only I must find out, only I can live my own life, only I can do what I can do. But the remarkable and wonderful joy and truth is: God really wants me to find out who I am, He really wants me to become "myself" in a unique way. This is why He "lets me go" sometimes, so that I can see for myself. (God is more "human" and more "patient" than I think, and He tells me I am more "divine" than I think!) God lets me go so that I can return: grown, expanded, mature. "All that I have is yours"—to know the meaning of these words of the Father is to know the truth about God Himself, about eternal life!

These questions are the only ones that will finally count (Matthew 25:31-46). Prayers, candles, fasts, going to church, being Orthodox and Christian, reading the words of Jesus Christ in the New Testament—all of this is only the way by which I can learn the truth about God, about man, about how to live my life. And the truth is: to love God and

to love my neighbor (the one “next to me” at my given moment) is really the same love! I can’t love God but hate men—I can’t love men but hate God. If I try to do the one without the other, I will be only fooling myself and falling short of the truth. This is the final judgment about myself, about my life, about any life. The words of Jesus are harsh, yet they fully fit the facts and express the truth.

Unless you forgive...(Matthew 6:14-21). The secret of life, of love, forgiveness, to see the “other” (and not myself) as more precious, as more wonderful, as unique, as adorable—this is the only way I can be really myself and live with him in love. One of Dostoevsky’s most beautiful characters in “The Brothers Karamazov” says: “Brothers, have no fear of men’s sin. Love a man even in his sin, for that resembles Divine Love, and is the highest love on earth. Love all of God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it...Love the animals, love the plants, love everything...At some thoughts one stands perplexed, especially at the sight of men’s sin, and wonders whether one should use force or humble love. Always decide to use humble love. If you resolve on that once and for all, you may subdue the whole world...” This is the “point” of life.