

Grace, mercy, and peace...

We must always beware those messengers of religion who promise false peace, easy answers to all life's hardships, a constant heady joy, and ceaseless victorious progress in spirituality. We must always be wary of those who present the Christian faith as a way to make it in the world with minimal trouble, and maximal achievement. We must beware because such religious schemes are constantly being thrown our way and because they are, like all effective advertising, very attractive. They appeal to what we want and to what we believe is good and what we think should be true.

So for instance, should not the Christian life be a happy life? What more could anyone want or need than happiness? So there are those churches and preachers that are convinced that they are proclaiming God's Word when they offer happiness. But is happiness really what the Bible teaches we should be looking for?

Now don't get me wrong. If you are happy, give thanks and pray that it may last a long time. Be happy in your happiness. Share your happiness with as many as you possibly can, as St. Paul says in Romans 12(:15), "Rejoice with those who rejoice...". But do not fall under the spell that happiness is the goal of the Christian faith. For right after St. Paul tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice, he also says to weep with those who weep.

In the same way, there are many preachers who try to draw people into the Christian church by offering them meaning and purpose in life, a sense of success, a reason and a place for good and valuable service and work. These

preachers sincerely believe that the church offers personal fulfillment. Once again, who can argue against personal fulfillment? We all desire to be known for doing something worthwhile. We all want to be able to work, serve, contribute. We long to have something to show for our lives in this world.

Good! Use your gifts, talents, abilities. Use your hands, heart, and voice. Work for one another. Care for others. Build, clean, sing, speak, pray. Every good and godly thing in the church that there is to do—do it. Do it with all your heart, and rejoice that you can do it. But at the same time do not think that this is what Christ and His church is all about. Jesus and the church is not about giving us a place to fulfill our need for a purpose in life.

I have known far too many dear people who have spent their lives working hard in a congregation or outside, and then frailty and illness sets in so that they can no longer do anything. They are crushed. They feel useless. What's the point of living?

Dear friend, do you think that Jesus had you in His church because He needed you? Do you think that He had you in His church because He wanted to keep you busy? Do you think that if you did not have hands or voice that the Lord would have turned you away and said, "Sorry, but I need able bodied workers in My kingdom"? Whether baptized in the prime of life or baptized as sickly baby near death in the hospital, we all are baptized utterly helpless and unable to contribute or give to God anything. Nor does He only keep us in the family if we make an adequate contribution in effort or money. Who can make an adequate contribution of any sort to the Lord God of all Creation who has both made you and also redeemed you? It is not for

your abilities that He has called you but because of His mercy.

Let me say it again. Work hard together. Contribute generously of your time and of your money. Take joy in doing all you can in the church for the blessing and benefit of others. What joy the new kitchen—to see all the people who worked so hard from beginning to end. What joy Vacation Bible School and Sunday School! Give thanks how God has used you to bring the Good News to others. But, dear friends, never, never, never think for a moment that Jesus wants you in His church because of what you can do or contribute. And never, never, never allow the church of the Lord Jesus simply to become a project, a way of finding personal fulfillment, because there will most certainly come times when the church will not be very personally fulfilling. There will come a time when you very well may not have the will or ability to work or contribute or even pray. There may very well come a time when it seems like the very joy of your soul is all dried up. The great temptation will then be to leave off the church, to be done with the church. Don't fall for it. It is a trick of the devil who wants nothing more than to keep you from Jesus.

Now it was actually the Gospel reading for today that has led me into what I have just said. You see, whereas all too many preachers are talking about purpose and self-fulfillment and pure joy and active service—talking about these as if they were what Christ and the church were all about—Jesus preaches something entirely different in our Gospel. He believes in truth in advertising, you might say. Jesus warns His apostles that being his disciple is going to bring many sad divisions and grief. He tells how even

families will be divided because of Him. He warns the apostles that far from finding their work of spreading the Gospel fulfilling and successful they will also be rejected. In fact, as you probably know, the tradition is that all the disciples except St. John were executed and even John was exiled to a sparsely populated island—hardly what anyone could call successful work, humanly speaking!

Far from offering good feelings and constant happiness, Jesus says that being His disciple means taking up the cross to follow Him. Being a Christian more often than not means hardship and struggle, both with those around us and even within ourselves as we fight against our inner temptations.

So if being a Christian involves heartache, trial, difficulty, pain, division, just as much as it means joy, work, fulfillment, consolation, what purpose or reason is there for me or anyone to be a Christian, for me to remain in this church?

The reward is very, very great indeed. The reward is Jesus Himself and God the Father. Jesus tells His apostles that whoever receives them receives Him; and whoever receives Jesus receives the One who sent Him. That is, anyone who receives the apostles receives the Lord Jesus who sent out the apostles and also receives God the Father who sent Jesus His Son.

The work of the apostles, though they now all are martyred and in heaven, continues in this world through the Holy Christian and apostolic church. For that church which purely and truly preaches and teaches the word given to us in the Holy Scripture, the Bible, is the Church of the apostles and of the Lord Jesus who sent them. In this Christian Church of Christ and His apostles the Word of Christ is

preached out into the ears, and those who gather here and receive this Word in faith receive not merely an empty message, but they also receive the Lord Jesus Christ whose word it truly is; and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ, they also receive God the Father who sent Him.

This is the great and awesome reward of being a Christian and being in His church, not that you are given good work to do—which you may be; not that you are always filled with happiness—although we pray often you are. But rather the greatest possible reward and blessing is given to those who gather in the church to receive the true Word of the Apostles: you are rewarded with Christ Jesus Himself and the Heavenly Father who sent Him.

Here in this place through the Word sung, proclaimed, read, preached, and given out in the Sacrament, Jesus gives Himself to you as a very great reward. This is not a reward that you have earned or merited, for it is a reward that He gives to one and all. He gives Himself to the tiniest little nursing infant as well as the most capable and professional; He gives Himself to that soul struggling with illness and frailty as well as to the hale and hardy; He gives Himself to those who are rejoicing as well as to those who are weeping.

He rewards you, not for what you have done, but He rewards YOU for what HE has done. What a strange and awesome God and Savior we have! He does the great work of sacrificing Himself on the cross. He wins the glorious battle of defeating Satan and the grave. He accomplishes every last good work pleasing to God, fulfilling God's will to utter perfection. He earns, merits, and deserves the highest and eternal reward. But look, here in this place, gathered to receive the preaching of His apostles, He freely gives to you. He gives you not just the heavenly reward that

He has earned, but He gives Himself to you. And we dare even say that He literally gives Himself to you in the Sacrament of His body and blood! And with Jesus also comes God the Father.

Here in His Church, receiving His Word, Christ gives you Himself and the Father also gives you Himself. So here God gives you forgiveness, divine acceptance, eternal life: a reward earned, not by you, but by Him.

So what do you expect from church? Happiness? Sometimes. Good wholesome work and service to do? Often. Self-fulfillment and purpose? Well, perhaps. But what the Holy Christian and Apostolic Church truly gives is a reward and treasure of far greater value than any of these. Here Christ gives you Himself.

Psalm 119:153-160

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Romans 6:1b-11

St. Matthew 10:34-42

^{BGT} **Matthew 10:34** Mh. nomi,shte o[ti h=lqon balei/n eivrh,nhn evpi.
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 th/j mhtro.j aurtou/ kai. nu,mfhn kata. th/j penqera/j aurtou/j(³⁶ kai.
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NOTES

- Scaer, Sermon on the Mount, p. 251
 “False prophets” perhaps refer to the persons
 condemned in the Old Testament, but such an
 interpretation is not only improbable but clearly
 impossible. Here the term “false prophets” seems to

depend for its meaning on the early church use of the word “prophet” for its preachers and clergy. In Acts 13:1, the church’s leaders are called the prophets and the teachers. In Matthew 23:34, Jesus says that he is sending the prophets along with the scribes and wise men, whom Luke interprets as apostles (11:49). and God the Father. Amen.