

SEPTEMBER 3, 2017

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

I CORINTHIANS 16: 13-24

“BE BRAVE, BE STRONG”

Back in the days of the Roman Empire, the most popular sport was the gladiator games. The huge stadiums would be packed with bloodthirsty crowds who came to cheer as the gladiators fought each other and slaughtered each other for the fans' entertainment. There was a philosopher named Alypius (a specialist in music theory, actually!) who despised the gruesome sport and refused to ever go along with his friends to the stadium. But they always tried to talk him into it. Finally, one day the pressure on him to go was so strong that he gave in----but with qualifications. He said he would go along to enjoy their company and get a taste of the atmosphere of the games, but he would not watch any of the actual fighting and killing. Whenever a fight was underway, he would cover his face with his hands and not look until the fight ended.

He did this for the first part of the afternoon----but then, there was such an incredible roar of cheering and applause from the crowd at one point, that he peeked. And he watched a man be killed by his opponent. The next match, he watched a little bit more of it. And before the day was over, he was watching it all just like everyone else. And he ended up becoming a big fan and frequent attender of the sport, even convincing others to go with him! (in “Our Daily Bread”, 12/2/07).

Temptation can be strong, very strong. It proved too strong for Alypius. In order to defeat it, we have to do a better job of fighting it than he did. In today's epistle reading, there is one verse that can be relevant to this struggle against temptation. It is I Corinthians 16:13 where the Holy Apostle writes to the ancient Corinthian Christians and to us-----“Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be brave, be strong.” Important words for us when we face temptation. To repeat them----“Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be brave, be strong.”

As Christians, we need to resist the devil and the temptations he tries on us. Satan is our enemy and he wishes to defeat us by tempting us to sin. If we give in, it can be the start of a process of drifting away from God.... So, St. Paul's words are important for us----be brave, be strong.

For we do not have to give in to any particular temptation. Those of you that aren't too young remember, from decades back, the comedian Flip Wilson. He played different characters when he was on TV (oh, the thousands of hours of my childhood wasted on TV---what a shame! I could have been studying Latin or Renaissance art, but instead I became an expert on the Beverly Hillbillies and Hogan's Heroes---wasted years!). One of his characters was a shrill woman named Geraldine. Geraldine was always getting into some kind of trouble. And her excuse every time was the same----“The devil made me do it!” Sorry, Geraldine, but you're wrong. The devil can't make us do anything because God has given us free will. The devil does tempt us and pressures

us----but we decide whether to do the right thing or the wrong thing.

We were united to Jesus Christ in Holy Baptism. And we received the filling of the Holy Spirit when we were baptized and chrismated. Because of that, we can, with God's help, win each struggle with Satan, his demons, and his temptations.

Sure, the devil is strong, but there is Someone much, much stronger. As St. John wrote in I John 4:4----"He (Christ) who is in you is greater than he (Satan) who is in the world." Jesus Christ is greater than Satan and stronger than Satan. And ever since we were born again in Holy Baptism, He lives within us. So, with His help, we can resist temptation. If we, as St. Paul urged in our epistle today, are "watchful, firm, brave, and strong", then, through the grace of Christ, we can win.

The Bible and the Church Fathers and Saints give lots of instruction as to how to defeat temptation. Today, we will look at 2 pointers that can be gleaned from all they say:

1. Nip temptation in the bud.
2. Don't just go along with everyone else (like old Alypius going to see the gladiators).

First----- Nip temptation in the bud. Strive to defeat temptation quickly, before it develops into a sin. Don't wait, don't play with it, don't give it lots of consideration. Beat it fast or it may become too late.

A make believe story to get this point across-----imagine that the natural history of our planet was quite a bit of different and that we still had dinosaurs today. Imagine you live in a town where Tyrannosaurus Rex dinosaurs often roamed the streets. You had to be very careful if you took a walk because one might pop out from behind a building and have you for lunch! And don't leave your dog out in the yard. One day you are out in your back yard and you see some eggs---huge eggs, obviously not bird eggs. You know right away what they are---dinosaur eggs. Would you say to yourself?---"Well, eggs are harmless and sure can't hurt anyone. I'll just leave them be." Not a smart decision. Because soon those eggs will hatch. At first, there will be cute baby dinosaurs but before long you will have ferocious and huge Tyrannosaurus Rexes living in your back yard? What to do? Nip the problem in the bud. Run to the garage and grab your hammer and smash every egg right away. (Breaking Chains of Addiction, Victor Mihailoff, Regina Orthodox Press, p. 27)

Nip temptations in the bud. Smash the eggs before they hatch. Temptations will come to us. Just don't toy with them, play with the idea, mull it over. That allows temptation to result in our sinning. The temptations that attack us have great variety---we could be tempted to angrily "tell someone off", to drink or eat too much, to go to computer sites we know we shouldn't go to, to gossip, to skip church, etc., etc.

Whatever the temptation that comes your way, smash the egg quickly. Walk away from the situation (even if that can only be done in your thoughts), start praying hard, get busy with something else to push the temptation out of your mind----whatever it takes to nip it in the bud. Smash the eggs fast.

Second---Don't go along with the crowd. That was Alypius' big mistake when he went to see the gladiators. Remember who you are---a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ. Be yourself, not what others think you should be.

Peer pressure can be a huge factor in temptation. There's that old saying----"Everybody does it." That will be a poor excuse when we stand before the throne of judgment one day! You *can*

be different than other people.

Don't give in to pressure, whether open or subtle, from others to just go along with what everyone else does. Nothing wrong with being different! If people think you're a "little odd" or "behind the times", so be it. Just do what is right.

But resisting peer pressure, whatever our age, can be very hard. To do so, we have to take seriously what St. Paul said in today's epistle reading-----"Be strong, be brave."

An experiment involving teens and peer pressure was done not too long ago. Quite a few groups of 10 teens each were formed. Each group would be taken into a room with a chalkboard on which had been drawn 3 lines of very different lengths. Before each group went in, a meeting was held secretly with 9 of the group. It was set up in such a way that the 10th person didn't even know the meeting was being held. The 9 were given special instructions. Then all 10 were led into the room. The researcher asked them to each say, as they were called on, which was the shortest of the 3 lines on the board. The first 9, because of the instructions at their secret meeting, one by one all firmly stated that the line that was actually the longest line was the shortest line. When the 10th person, the one not at the secret meeting, was called on, he or she would always, in each group, look quite confused and stressed out-----but in the majority of the groups the 10th person would go along with what the other 9 had said, even though it was totally obvious they were wrong! In most of the groups, peer pressure won out. (in "Our Daily Bread, 6/5/06)

But not only teens often give in to peer pressure...so do we who are adults. Think of the example of gossip...how hard it is to resist entering in when involved in a conversation with a group of people and they all start gossiping. Good time to remember Paul's words---"be strong".

So, the #2 point for resisting temptation is to resist peer pressure. Be brave, be strong, be different. Don't just go along with the crowd.

In conclusion, in today's epistle, St. Paul gives us some key words as to how to be holier Christians, more obedient to God, and how to resist the temptation to sin----"be brave, be strong." And two ways to work on that are to nip temptation in the bud and not to go along with what "everyone else" is doing.

Satan loves it when we don't nip temptation in the bud, but let it grow and flourish. And when we allow peer pressure to determine what we will do. He loves it because it makes his goal of destroying our souls that much easier.

So, fight the devil and fight temptation. And if you fight hard by the grace of God, if you obey St. Paul's words----"be brave, be strong"----God will give you victory.

