

Epistle Reading: St. Paul's Letter to the Romans 15:1-7

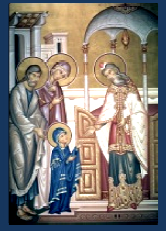
Gospel Reading: Matthew 9:27-35

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning I am again going to speak about the Epistle reading rather than the Gospel because of its almost poignant relevance for us today. But before I do I want to mention that today is also the Feast of St. Mary Magdalen. According to the most ancient traditions of Christianity, however, and even according to the Gospel narratives, the repentant prostitute in the Gospel accounts is another Mary altogether. It's important for us to know that the Orthodox tradition about her is quite different from that of Western Christianity, where she is always portrayed as the penitent harlot. How this happened in Western Christianity is another tale altogether, but it's vital that we know the truth about this noble woman because of the slanderous ideas being propagated against her by tragically popular but trashy and completely unscholarly books and films like the "Da Vinci Code" and other thinly disguised anti-Christian sources.

St. Mary Magdalen, as she actually and really was, as a *historical* person rather than the creation of novelists, is much more interesting and important. In Orthodox Christianity we know her under these three magnificent titles: "Equal to the Apostles", "Holy Myrrhbearer" and "Apostle to the Apostles" Let me explain.

The Orthodox Church considers her to be "Equal to the Apostles" because she was the first person to proclaim the Resurrection of Christ to others, before any of the Gospels were written. In addition she worked with St. John the Evangelist in his missionary efforts in Ephesus and elsewhere. Because she is also the one who proclaimed the Resurrection of Christ to the Apostles themselves, who were in hiding, she became the "Apostle to the Apostles". *And* she was one of the Holy Myrrh-bearing Women—in fact the most important of them because she is the one who bought myrrh and spices to anoint the body of Christ after His death, thus honoring Him in a special way not usually shown to the corpses of the dead, especially not to the bodies of executed criminals. This is why two of the Gospel writers placed her as *first* among the other Holy Women of Jerusalem.



Let me say clearly and firmly: contrary to what is “in the air” about this wonderful Saint today, Mary Magdalene was *not* the wife of the Lord Jesus Christ, nor did she bear His child. In fact, there is absolutely no historical evidence for such an idea. So let us know her and venerate her and ask her intercession as the exalted personage she *really* was!

Now, to today’s Epistle reading, which begins with this verse: “*We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*”

Brothers and sisters, we live in a very selfish and self-centered culture today. For us, everything is about being happy, about pleasing ourselves. When I was young the common saying was, “Do it if it feels good”—actually a very degrading way to view life. St. Paul in this Epistle calls us to something much higher. He tells us plainly and simply: *don’t* be so concerned about pleasing yourself, but be *very* concerned about helping others, especially those who are weaker than we are.

St. Paul then continues: “*Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification.*” The term “to edify” is a very old fashioned word that is almost never heard in our society any longer because we are now interested not in “edifying” *anyone* but in scandal, degradation, and gossip. “Edify” means “to instruct and improve, especially in moral and religious knowledge: to uplift; to enlighten, or inform.” St. Paul, therefore, is teaching us that we have a *positive duty* to *edify our neighbor*—that is, everyone around us, everyone with whom we come into contact. How difficult is this? Actually not very difficult, as long as we obey the commandments and do not repeat gossip and scandal or make judgmental comments about others, and as long as we are struggling to acquire virtue.

St. Paul then cites our Lord Jesus Christ Himself as the supreme example of One who did not please Himself, but came to edify us and save us. *He*, therefore, is our example, our model, our leader and guide, and our mentor.

And he concludes this instruction with these words: “*Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus:*

*That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

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*Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete*



Here he reminds us of how endlessly patient our God is with *us*—and therefore how patient we must be with each other. And he tells us that ours is a God of “consolation.” To be consoling is to comfort someone when they are in trouble, hurting, or have suffered a loss. And just as God is consoling to us when we are open to His consolation, so must we be consoling and comforting to others.

All of this, St. Paul explains, builds up a kind of “like-mindedness” among the followers of Christ. It puts us all on the same page, as it were. For if we are all, individually, seeking to bear each other’s burdens, edify and comfort one another, then we draw closer and closer to each other under the loving and protective wings of God—as we read in Psalm 91 (4): *“He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust.”* And in Psalm 36 (7): *“How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.”*

Now, all of this business about comforting each other, bearing each other’s burdens, and so forth—let’s not mistake this for being “nice”. “Nice” isn’t what St. Paul is talking about. In our culture, people can be nice to your face and turn around and stab you in the back. “Nice” in our world today is often more about hypocrisy than Christian love. No, what St. Paul is actually doing is referring us back to the teachings of our Master and Lord, Jesus, in the Gospel accounts. In particular we should recall that the teachings of Christ are introduced in the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, which is the most precise summary of the spiritual life you can find anywhere—and we hear these Beatitudes sung or chanted in every Divine Liturgy. Yet they have become so familiar to us that we don’t actually pay attention them very much any more, or try to apply them to ourselves. Yet these Beatitudes are a very careful explanation of what St. Paul was telling us in this morning’s Epistle reading. The Lord explained what it means to have a Christ-like poverty of spirit, blessed mourning or sorrow (over our sins and the sins of the world), meekness, a hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice, mercy, and purity of mind, body and heart; the Beatitudes also teach us that we must be peacemakers, that we should expect to be persecuted because we are Christians—and therefore it follows that if we aren’t being persecuted then we should question whether we are really Christians!—, and that we should rejoice and be glad no matter what happens to us or the world around us, never failing in our cheerful proclamation that Christ is indeed risen, as we see in the lives of the saints—here I’m thinking about the

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radiant St. Seraphim of Sarov, who greeted everyone, all year round, with “Christ is risen!” and addressed each person as “My joy.”

So, St. Paul provides us with the “formula”, if you will; and the Savior gives us the details.

So, brothers and sisters, let us go forth from here today prepared, ready, and even anxious to bear the burdens of others in a healthy way, and to offer comfort and consolation to those in need, thus building up the Body of Christ, the Mystical Church which gathers around the Divine Supper of the Lamb at each and every Divine Liturgy.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.