

Galatians 2:16-20 Justification  
Sermon by Fr. Terenti Wasielewski  
Sunday, November 1, 2020

The first Sunday in November is the traditional time at St. Nicholas that we not only celebrate the memory of Sts Cosmas and Damian the great Unmercenarys of Mesopotamia, but we pray a Litiya Service for Good Health and we receive the Sacrament of Holy Unction. As the winter approaches, we need to take all precautions against the cold. This year presents an added challenge with COVID escalating exponentially; therefore, it is even more imperative that we pray the service and receive protection with the Holy Oil.

Over the centuries Holy Unction deviated from its original purpose and it eventually became a sacrament of last rites. Unfortunately, this was an influence of western Christianity. Reception of Holy Unction like that of Holy Eucharist became an infrequent event. This is an aberration of the original purpose. What purpose would you need the sacrament at the point of death? At the point of death you are preparing to enter the next life.

We are all sick spiritually and physically whether we appear to be under the weather or appear to be a specimen of good health. Even a fit athlete is not perfect physically and certainly not spiritually. Sickness doesn't necessarily mean that you are confined to a bed in the hospital, but rather for the Christian we are in a continual state of imperfection. Imperfection that eventually causes our bodies and minds to deteriorate over time and may lead to be confined to a bed in the hospital or eventual death.

It is something we cannot escape, but we can assuage our own imperfection by resorting to the tools that our church has given us. Today we receive the sacrament as a tool to not only prevent physical illness to occur but to restore our spiritual frailty. The Greek word *elaios* (**oil**), as with *eleos* (**mercy**), is synonymous with soothing, comforting and refers to both our physical and spiritual healing. Our bodies and souls are so intertwined that we cannot heal one without the other.

Even at the point of death when our bodies and souls will separate temporarily, the hope is that we will be reunited into a transformed body and soul, so different from our body and soul on earth. The body and soul that we prayed for on earth and anointed with unction in hopes of restoration will be fully realized in the kingdom should we sustain our baptismal garment while we are here on earth.

In today's epistle we listen to St. Paul telling the Galatians that we are justified by our faith in Christ rather by the works of the law. We can use St Paul's words to explain why we receive the Sacrament of the Holy Unction. We come to receive the sacraments of the church, not because it is legislative duty, but it is out of faith and love of Christ and that it is our desire to be with Him in the everlasting kingdom.

You see Paul is reacting to his own upbringing. The Pharisaic Jews of the time were obedient to the law even though they lacked the faith and love—therefore their actions were empty, they were devoid of any connection with God. This is what St. Paul means when he says “by the works of the law no one will be justified.”

Justified is an interesting word. Sometimes we equate justification with salvation. However, this is not the case. For those of us who took typing class in high school and worked on a school newspaper, we probably remember justified type. That meant that each side of the column was evenly lined with words and that spacing was adjusted inside the sentence to make it a symmetrical box.

When someone uses the word justified to describe an action that they did, the action was done for a good or legitimate reason. In theology, justified means to be made righteous in the sight of God.

We need to carry this theological definition further and say that justified means it is the beginning of a process of being with God, but it doesn't mean we have gained the ultimate prize. Therefore one instance of being justified is not enough for us to think of salvation, rather it is a life-time of us striving to live a righteous life. This is what we often call the process of *theosis*. We cannot become God, but we can get closer and closer. The fathers of the church often speak of *theosis* as the returning to the state of man prior to the fall. St. Athanasius said that the Son of God became man so that man can become god. God is with a small “g” because it is impossible for us to become God himself or even begin to know or experience His essence as St. Gregory Palamas tells us, but we can become God-like through His energies.

So the receiving of Holy Unction is one of many ways we can get closer to God. It is not an “in and of itself” process, but if we are repentant and if we participate in all the sacraments of the church, if we pray unceasingly like St. Paul tells us, if we are kind, compassionate and forgive as St. Paul tells us to do, if we love God and our fellow man to the fullest as Christ instructs us, then we are on the way to a successful journey here on earth that will give us the hope of being in the everlasting kingdom. Amen.