

Dear friend,

In his most famous novel, “The Brother’s Karamazov”, Fyodor Dostoevsky records the following conversation between Father Zosima, a Greek Orthodox monk and a wealthy woman who is asking him how to find assurance of salvation. He tells her that the way to be assured that Christ has saved you is to engage in the active love of your neighbor. Here is what she says in response to his advice:

“In active love? There’s a question—and such a question! You see, I so love humanity that – would you believe it?—I often dream of forsaking all that I have, leaving my daughter, and becoming a sister of mercy. I close my eyes and think and dream, and at that moment I feel full of strength to overcome all obstacles. No wounds, no festering sores could at that moment frighten me. I would bind them up and wash them with my own hands... I would be ready to kiss such wounds... But could I endure such a life for long? ...that’s my most agonizing question. I shut my eyes and ask myself, ‘Would you persevere long on that path? And if the patient whose wounds you are washing did not meet you with gratitude, but worried you with his whims, without valuing or remarking your charitable services, began abusing you and rudely commanding you, and complaining to the superior authorities of you (which often happens when people are in great suffering)—what then? Would you persevere in your love, or not?’ And do you know, I came with horror to the conclusion that, if anything could dissipate my active love to humanity, it would be ingratitude. In short, I am a hired servant, I expect my payment at once—that is, praise and the repayment of love with love. Otherwise I am incapable of loving anyone.”

I don’t know about you, but this fictional woman describes me, exactly. When I examine why I am angry and sad and anxious it is most often due to the fact that others (especially my family) are not responding to me with the affection, respect, cooperation, etc. that I believe I deserve. When I consider why I am so unwilling to give up my time, my comfort in order to serve others I discover a fear of losing what I have or that my sacrifice will not be adequately rewarded. I find that I am “a hired servant.”

As we saw in 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 on July 28th, the apostle Paul describes how it is that he does not grow discouraged and quit loving others. Paul’s love of others cost him all manner of deprivation and was often repaid with disrespect, indifference and violence (See 2 Cor. 11). How did Paul escape from being a “hired servant”? The answer is in vv. 5-6. First, God, in his grace, enabled Paul to see the glory and beauty of Christ (v.6). He is amazed at the person of Jesus and the love of God for him in Christ. Therefore his joy is determined by how God feels about him and acts towards him, not by how human beings feel about him and act towards him. Thus, he is able to not preach himself, but Jesus Christ as Lord and himself as the slave of others for the sake of Jesus (v. 5). He is after one thing, increasing his joy in Christ by enabling others to find their joy in Christ.

What must happen for me (and you) to love people? We must discover that Jesus is really all that we need. We must prove that he is all we need by persevering in love for others when they repay our love with ingratitude. We must risk losing our time, comfort, pride, etc. in order to meet the needs of others. The reason that Jesus says that the way the world will know that we are Christians is by our love for one another (John 13:35) is because only those who are delighted with the love of Christ for them will persevere in loving others when their love is not reciprocated.

I want to not be a “hired servant” when it comes to loving others. I want to reveal the greatness of Christ’s love by being the slave of others. This is what every Christian yearns for. The way that we become these sorts of people is by pleading with God to give us “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” through his written word as we read it, listen to it and talk about it. O that the Lord would be gracious to us and so fill us with his love that we freely love others.

Pleading for mercy to be a slave,