

The Pilgrim's Tale: An Analysis

by Matthew Clendineng

The Pilgrim's Tale (or The Way of a Pilgrim) is a Russian folk story that originated in the nineteenth century. It is a powerful story in the orthodox tradition and it explores the value of the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner". In this case we shall be studying the first section of this work.

The Pilgrim's Tale is the story of a man seeking how he can live a biblical life. Specifically, he wants to know how he can pray without ceasing, as the author of the Epistle to the Thessalonians instructs. In an attempt to find the answer to this question the pilgrim goes to many great preachers and theologians hoping that they will be able to explain it to him.

First the pilgrim goes to the cathedral church on the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee. The bishop preaching that day says that it is first necessary to acquire a solid faith before you can pray. This does not satisfy the pilgrim, "how do I acquire it, when faith is not from us. For it is God's gift."

Next the pilgrim visits the church of the Theological Academy on the Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross. The preacher at this church spoke forcefully against prolonged prayers and suggested that short but ardent prayers are what is required. The pilgrim disagreed and writes, "The Lord commanded not only prolonged prayer, but also prayer at all times, and he illustrated this in the parable – that it is always fitting to pray and not grow weary."

On another Sunday in another town the pilgrim heard the archpriest speak. The archpriest taught that there is no use praying constantly if you are not doing acts of piety. Prayer, according to the archpriest will not be heard without works of faith, works of charity and frequent attendance at church. After reading Isaiah the pilgrim concluded that this was incorrect: "First of all, you must seek the Lord and call upon him in prayer. Then, when on account of this he draws near to your soul, you must endeavor to leave behind to works of sin."

Next the pilgrim visits a learned nobleman but the pilgrim does not understand the nobleman's words. The pilgrim then visits a kindly monastery supervisor who teaches him out of a book by Bishop Dimitry called Spiritual Training of the Inner Person. This book tells the pilgrim that it is customary to call an act that is performed often unceasing. This did not satisfy the Pilgrim's quest.

Finally the pilgrim met "a monk of the great habit from the hermitage" on the road. This monk taught the Pilgrim that, "It is not by the wisdom of this world nor by superficial inquisitiveness that the celestial light of unceasing interior prayer is reached, but, on the contrary, by poverty of spirit and practical experience it is found in mysterious simplicity." The monk goes on to tell the pilgrim that perfection and righteousness are things that we are not capable of. "Consequently, only frequency and regularity are left to the portion of our ability as means to acquire prayerful purity, which is the mother of every spiritual blessing."

The monk then teaches the pilgrim to pray the Jesus prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Through the ever increasing repetition of this prayer and a constant concentration on Jesus through the prayer the pilgrim is able to nearly find what he has been seeking. “Even though I have not attained unceasing, self-activating spiritual prayer in the heart, still, glory be to God, I now clearly understand what the expression means that I heard in the Epistle: Pray unceasingly.”

There are two important aspects to the Pilgrim’s Tale. First is the journey itself, which itself allowed the pilgrim to find what he was looking for. Second is the use of a book called the Philokalia, which the pilgrim was able to use to better see what the Bible taught.

The pilgrim’s journey is important because without the journey the pilgrim would not have been ready when he found the answer to his question. The journey taught the pilgrim perseverance, and humility. The pilgrim had to persevere in order to find his answer. At any point the pilgrim could have turned away from his journey and gone on to live a perfectly fine Christian life. But the pilgrim wanted more. He wanted to find how he could have the best possible relationship with God, and because he persevered he was eventually led to that place.

It is important to chronicle all of the dead ends that the pilgrim went down before he eventually found the monk who instructed him. Even after the pilgrim found the monk he still had to persevere through the struggle of beginning the discipline of prayer he was pursuing.

The second important aspect of the Pilgrim’s Tale is how the Philokalia is used. The Philokalia, a book filled with the writings of great religious fathers, is not viewed as being the all important book. Rather the Philokalia is used as a means of interpreting the Bible. The monk tells the pilgrim, “No, it is not more sublime nor is it holier than the Bible, but it does contain lucid explanations of what the Bible holds mystically and what cannot be easily grasped by our shortsighted mind.” The monk goes on to explain that just as you use a piece of glass to study the sun, in the same way, you can use the Philokalia to study the Bible.

In today’s world it is important to be reminded that truths are often only revealed to us after periods of perseverance. In fact, we are often not ready to accept the truth until we have gone through the period of perseverance. If the pilgrim had met the monk at the beginning he would have just rejected him as crazy; but because the pilgrim had persevered, God had brought him to place where he was ready to hear what the monk was saying. Only after he had persevered was he humble enough to accept the monk’s guidance. In our Christian walk, in our ministry, in our relationships, the discovery of God and his will is often only revealed to us after we have persevered and been made humble.

Often times in our ministry we elevate tradition to a height that it does not deserve. Tradition is not Jesus, tradition is not God, and tradition is not the Bible. Rather tradition is a means of exploring God, Jesus and the Bible. Just as the Philokalia was only a means of exploring the Bible, so also church tradition is a means of exploring God; it is not an end in itself. It is important to be reminded that books, traditions and other Christian practices, while held in a high esteem, should not be held in a place higher than they deserve.