

**SEPTEMBER 18, 2011 HOMILY
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

MARK 8:34-9:1

“WORKING AS FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST”

One of the most famous pastors and preachers in America in the 1800s was Phillips Brooks. One day, Rev. Brooks was out horse-shopping in Boston where he lived. This was in the years before automobiles so buying a horse was not a little thing. It wasn't for pleasure riding, but to get him around every day as he made his pastoral calls in and around the city. He wanted just the right animal. The horse-seller presented to him what he said would be the perfect horse for him. He said, "Rev., this horse is wonderful. It's kind, gentle, smart, obedient, hard-working, and it never bites!" Rev. Brooks looked the horse over carefully, saying, "Well, that certainly sounds good----kind, gentle, smart, obedient, hard-working, and never bites!" Finally, he told the salesman----"Well, if this horse is indeed as you describe it----kind, gentle, smart, obedient, hard-working, and never bites----I don't want to buy it. Instead, I want to sign it up as a member for my church!" (in "Our Daily Bread", 4/17/99)

Wouldn't priests love it if all parishioners were like that horse? Kind, gentle, smart, obedient, hard-working, and they never bite. That would be great!

And I'm sure parishioners would love it if their priests were all like that horse, too----priests that are kind, gentle, smart, obedient, hard-working, and never bite.

If only all of us, as followers of Jesus Christ, could be like that horse!

Following Jesus Christ---that is one aspect of today's gospel lesson from St. Mark. Following Jesus Christ---that's a very big decision to make. It means giving our life over to Him, giving up our life for Him. As the Lord said in today's gospel, in Mark 8:34----"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Denying ourselves, taking up our cross----that means that following Jesus Christ means a total commitment to Him.

It means not just being a follower in name only. It means not just being a follower of Christ from 10-11:30 a.m. on Sundays (although you should certainly be right here then!). It means following Him seven days a week.

Part of really being a follower of Jesus Christ is serving Him and working for Him. But to truly serve Jesus Christ, to truly work for Him as one of His followers, we have to do it in the right way.

Someone may ask---Isn't any kind of work for God and His Church a good thing? No, not always. It may be a good thing that is being done in terms of the actual work and its results. But it is possible to do good things for bad reasons. And then the good thing isn't so good anymore!

There are two ways in particular that sometimes we do good things as followers of the Lord but not always for such good reasons. Sometimes we have mixed motives. These two ways are closely related----ONE: Sometimes we serve God and His Church more to bring glory to ourselves than to God. TWO: Sometimes we serve God and His Church in such a way as to get a chance to exercise authority over others, to get some power, to be a boss.

Number one---working for the Lord as a way to bring glory to self, not God. Sometimes we

get proud about our service to the Lord. That thing we do for the church---how important it is! How well I do it! How pleased God must be! And how much everyone else must admire me! (Or, at least, *should* admire me.)

And getting proud about it then leads to thinking that we do is more important than what someone else does for God. In fact, our ministry is so much better that we think what others do may be below us---we have more important work to do! Father Anthony Coniaris, in one of his many books, tells about a little parish that couldn't afford a janitor. So all the members took turns cleaning the bathrooms according to a schedule everyone was signed up on. A new convert became part of the parish and the priest one day explained to him about their volunteer cleaning system and asked him what week he would like to clean the bathrooms. The new member responded, "Father, I don't think I'm converted enough to scrub toilets!" (in Sacred Symbols That Speak, Vol. I, Father Anthony Coniaris, p. 98)

If our attitude gets like that---that my work for God is better than someone else's and I can't lower myself to do what others do---then even though on the surface our work is for Christ, in reality it's really not so much for Christ as it is for myself. Then I am doing work that seems to be for God, but it's really to make me look good, feel good, and gain admiration.

Number 2---doing work for God in order to exercise authority over others, to get some power. Doing some work for the Lord can become for some of us a way to get in charge of something, to feel good about being a boss, to throw our weight around some. We start to think things such as "I know best how things should be done. Others are going to have to do what I say so it goes well." Then the goal changes from bringing glory to God to having power over other people.

And that means, obviously, that we're not really working for God anymore, but for ourselves. Some orchestra conductors say the hardest spot to fill well in an orchestra is the second violin position, "second fiddle". One conductor said, "I can get plenty of good 1st violinists, but to find one who can play "second fiddle" with enthusiasm is tough. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony." (in "Pulpit Helps", July, 1979, p. 11)

If I insist on never being second fiddle, but always have to be first violin, then perhaps that work I do for God isn't really for him, but for me.

This is what I would like for each of us to do to deal with this problem. (This includes clergy, because we often have more problems like this with ourselves than anyone---I could tell you stories....) Think of everything you do for the Lord and for His Church. For some, that may take a while because some of you do a lot! Think of every form of service you carry out and then ask yourself---why do I do it? Be honest, be real. If you find that you totally or partly are doing it get some glory for yourself or to get a chance to boss others, then you need to work on changing your motives and attitude. You need to change so that you are really working for God, not for yourself. You need to work on what Christ talked about in today's gospel reading----truly following Christ by denying yourself and taking up your cross.

Whatever ministry and work you do as a follower of Jesus Christ, do it as well as you can. And do it not looking for glory for yourself or wishing to boss others, but do it for Him.

And one last thing----maybe you look at what you do for God and it seems small to you. And maybe it seems small to some others. But it's not small in God's eyes. Whatever you do for Him is important

You know the story of the tragedy of the Titanic---how the huge passenger liner struck an

iceberg in the North Atlantic about a hundred years ago and then sunk, killing many. There's no question it was the iceberg that sunk the Titanic but research has shown more about why the ship couldn't survive the crash. The ship was supposed to be unsinkable, built in such a way that it could survive even hitting an iceberg. Why didn't it? Well, the manufacturers cut some corners on one of the little things while building it. The rivets that held the hull's plates together were supposed to have been made of steel. But the manufacturer, apparently thinking that such little items as rivets couldn't matter much, saved money by using wrought iron rivets. And those cheap rivets couldn't handle the strain of that collision—and the ship sank. A rivet---just a tiny thing but crucially important. (in "Our Daily Bread", 10/29/07)

That "little thing" you do for God? It's not really little---it's important.

Whatever work you do for the Lord---whether it seems big or small---strive to do it really for *Him*, not for yourself.