

After listening to Jesus’ words seemingly promoting physical self-mutilation for the sake of the Kingdom of God preceded by the author James’ harsh words directed at the wealthy is: “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ” really what we want to say? Perhaps the better response is: “Thanks be to God” we don’t have to listen to any more of this!!

As I reflected on today’s readings, I searched for some way to make sense of them. In the process I was drawn to the Rule of Benedict, the fourth century guide which the founder of monastic life in the Western Church wrote to regulate the personal and communal life of those who wished to follow Christ in the enclosure of the monastery. In chapter four, titled “The instruments of good works”, St. Benedict lays the groundwork on which the monk is to build his life. Containing seventy-two maxims these “instruments” reprise of the Ten Commandments, the Eight Beatitudes, and what are traditionally labeled the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, as well as several wisdom maxims drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures. The central theme around which the “instruments of good works” are organized is maxim 21 of chapter 4: **“Prefer nothing to the love of Christ.”** Like Jesus, like James, Benedict issues the fundamental gospel call: **Conversion of life, making God and God’s Kingdom the primary focus of life.**

Jesus’ blunt statements about physical mutilation are not meant to be taken literally. They do, however, make a fundamental point—Jesus is telling us that if anything in our life is leading us away from God, symbolized by physical choices made with the organs of our bodies, it would be better to live without those members than to risk losing the gift of divine life. Jesus is calling us to observance of the First Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” God has loved us first. The Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, the Corporal and Spiritual works of Mercy—all equal our response in love to the God’s love for us. The greatest temptation of our life ***idolatry***. The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** in its treatment of the First Commandment reminds us: *“Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, Satanism), power pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc. Jesus says,*

*'You cannot serve God and mammon.'*” (CCC #2113). Nowhere does the Bible nor Church teaching condemn the possession of wealth as such. But they do warn about its allure and its accumulation for selfish ends that can lead to the destruction of the human soul. This past July's news story about the former CEO of Peregrine Financial Corporation in Cedar Falls attempted suicide which led to the discovery of an elaborate twenty year scheme in which he stole approximately \$200 million from his clients and diverted the funds to his own personal use is a sobering reminder of the temptation against idolatry Jesus and James give.

Thomas Merton the twentieth century Trappist spiritual writer speaks of the struggle to choose between lesser gods and preferring Christ when he states: “A man who has been killed by one enemy is just as dead as one killed by a whole army. If you are friends with one habit of mortal sin you live in death, even though you may seem to have all the other virtues.

Some people think it is enough to have one virtue, like kindness or broadmindedness or charity, and let everything else go. But if you are unselfish in one way and selfish in twenty-five other ways your virtue will not do you much good. In fact, it will probably turn out to be nothing more than a twenty-sixth variety of the same selfishness, disguised as virtue.

Therefore, do not think that because you seem to have some good quality, all the evil in you can be excused or forgotten on that account alone.” (*New Seeds of Contemplation*)

Then how can we possibly achieve the goal of conversion of “preferring Christ”? On our own, it is impossible. But as Jesus in another place reminds us, for God nothing is impossible. IN today's reading from the book of Numbers and in the gospel we hear of God lavishing his gift of the Holy Spirit on anyone who is open to it. St. Theresa of Avila reminds us of this truth as she states: “Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing away: God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing: God alone suffices.” We pray today for the grace to “prefer nothing to the love of Christ.”