

Dostoevsky and the Panacea for Personal Judgment

by Pierce Taylor Hibbs

Proverbs echo in the wind tunnel of history. We cannot help but hear reverberations of past wisdom in present-day prose.

In the *Manipulus Florum* ("handful of flowers"), for instance, we find the following words attributed to Saint Augustine: "The pride of angels made them demons; the humility of men makes them as angels." Quite the maxim, isn't it? In seven hundred years, we haven't changed all that much. Pride still brings out the worst in us, and humility, the best.

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Fyodor Dostoevsky would concur. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the spiritual leader Father Zossima teaches the protagonist that a critical part of what it means to be a faithful servant of God is that he must see himself as "guilty before all people, on behalf of all and for all, for all human sins, the world's and each person's." Striking words, aren't they? Think of it: the world's loudest evils, the most disturbing and callous actions, are but reflections of quieter atrocities in our own soul.

Of course, Father Zossima's exhortation is not so popular. We despise the idea of universal guilt and shame. It is difficult enough for us to look our own shortcomings in the eye, let alone those of the other broken souls around us. But Dostoevsky has reminded me that there is an important place for universal or communal guilt – for an utterly abasing humility – in human redemption. Though, to be fair, it was not his idea to begin with.

A SCRIPTURAL IDEA

The notion can be traced to the pages of Scripture. For many years, members of the Orthodox Church have prepared for the Eucharist by uttering the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15, "I believe, O Lord, and I confess that you are truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." Paul placed himself below *all* sinners. This is the man who repeatedly sacrificed his body for the gospel and roamed the Mediterranean world planting and strengthening the church, tamping the soil around the brittle roots of young converts. Below the Roman soldiers who


mocked his lord, below the consul who sent his king to a cross, below the disciple who betrayed his master for 30 pieces of silver, sat the Apostle Paul. He was above none of it.

Paul's words construct for us a window through which we look to understand something of the nature of sin. It is a window through which he himself looked. As he peered into it, Paul did not see the butcherly brutes whose whips were saturated with Christ's blood, he did not see the sordid prefect who would rather preserve a capricious peace than set an innocent man free, and he did not see the most nefarious recreant of history, who betrayed the son of God with a kiss. (Judas, mind you, is the one whom Dante placed in the final circle of hell.) Paul looks through the window and sees *himself*. And because he sees himself, because he is the "chief of sinners," he can approach every other person around him with a profound sense of humility rather than judgment.

We must understand that Paul's confession was the true reflection of his soul's disposition. He was voicing the deep humility that results from a shattering encounter with the holy God. Prostrated, broken and blind before God, Paul would not have recognized his *relative* wickedness; he would have been struck dumb by his devilry. Perhaps the Orthodox Church was quick to notice that salvation, for Paul, did not come in gradations. Everyone was the worst. Everyone was at death's door. Everyone had spit in God's face and was awaiting execution. Everyone, himself included, was the chief of sinners.

EVERYONE IS THE WORST

The words Dostoevsky gives to Father Zossima may seem mystical, even extreme by the standards of the Western Christian mind. But one cannot question their biblical foundation. I would go even further. In Paul's simple confession, we may find (dare I say it?) the panacea for our daily personal judgment. Personal judgment is often predicated on a scale of evil: Some things are worse than others. There is certainly truth to this. Stealing a pack of chewing gum seems trite compared to placating a corrupt government. But where we leave the beaten path of Scripture is when we make that scale representative of human worth – the person who steals the pack of gum is *better* than the person who corrupts the judicial system. This is the kind of thinking that would lead to the idea that some people are less in need of redemption



than others, and according to Paul, this is simply never the case, because everyone is the worst. Any other position inevitably leads to pride and personal judgment.

To test this truth in my own life, I began an experiment. Each time I saw or heard someone say or do something that irritated or disgusted me, I would begin my inner critique with the words, "I can't believe 'I' would do that." I thought this might develop the sense of unity Father Zossima had spoken of – the kind of unity the Apostle Paul seemed to foster in the early church – and as I practiced this I found it began to do so, yet I was even more taken by the recession of personal judgment. Each time I uttered these words (and sometimes I had to utter them several times), I felt a communal sense of shame, which was a prelude to compassion. This began to shape the way I perceived others. The seminarian who just had to mention his scholarly work in every conversation

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was me; the actress who spouted about just following your feelings: me; the bicyclist who flipped me off when he ran a red light, the man at the gas station who blocked my exit while he carried on a casual conversation with the owner, the teenager in the muffler-free Mustang who revs his engine just as our baby is falling asleep – me, me and me (with a far less fashionable car).

Of course, I cannot claim to have actually committed these particular sins – neither would Paul or Father Zossima. We each take ownership for our own abysmal reservoir of iniquities (Deut. 24:16). Yet, there is something to be said for the unbiased sympathy produced by such a thought process. I slowly began to notice that there was no depth of human sin that was foreign to me. The shock value of evil had been mitigated, and I found myself distantly identifying with the most horrendous crimes, to my own horror. In this feeling, I tasted the meaning of Father Zossima's words: that only perceiving ourselves as the worst of all sinners in the world "will the goal of our unity be achieved." It is a frightening unity, but a unity nonetheless.

A RUSSIAN PROPHET

I hadn't planned on *The Brothers Karamazov* catalyzing a paradigm shift in my perception of others – and I certainly never planned on taking theological advice from a classic novel. I thought that this would be a relaxing, light read in comparison to the heavy theological prose to which I was accustomed. But Dostoevsky is hardly light reading – neither, for that matter, is the Apostle Paul.

Dostoevsky was, as pointed out by Joseph Frank, a prophet for his time – but not just of the political forces that were beginning to arise in Russia and in broader Europe (e.g., a godless socialism). His prophetic vision extended even to fundamental morality. Through his characters in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he has shown me that though I may not have committed the Boston bombing, my pride would quickly have me judge those who did, and that, perhaps, is just as destructive when it comes to human unity. Personal judgment does not explode like a pipe bomb; it soaks into the soil of the heart, quietly corroding humility and allowing the botany of pride to sew its seeds. Most important, it keeps us from seeing ourselves as we truly are: the worst of all sinners.

After enough meditation on 1 Timothy 1:15, I have little doubt that you too will find yourself at the foundation of history's mountain of sinners. I'll be right there with you ... and so will Dostoevsky and the Apostle Paul.

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