**12 4 16**

***“Thought for the Week”***

***“Brethren, before faith came, we were confined under the Law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed.”***

In today’s Epistle St. Paul is showing how radically different our faith is that that of the conventional religions. Every other major religion outside of Christianity is centered on a teaching, or set of practices or “laws” that guides the believer into some sort of virtue and “salvation.” Sometimes even we as Orthodox Christians fall back into practicing this kind of religion. We seek primarily to follow the fasting practices of the Church, attend Liturgical Services, say our personal prayers, and participate regularly in the sacraments. Of course, these are all good and necessary, however alone they are not sufficient. All of these things are for one purpose- that Christ will dwell in us with power. This is a free gift to us that no human practice or teaching can produce.

Beloved, first we must understand that the Faith that St. Paul is talking about is not simply our own personal faith, but rather it is the Faith of Jesus Christ- it is His faith that dwells in us. It is given to us freely through holy Baptism. The very next line in St. Paul’s epistle after he talks about this Faith is “for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” As He dwells in us our humanity is transformed and renewed. We become a new creation. This new creation is the purest love. Love comes to dwell deep within our hearts. Therefore if Love dwells in us we must preserve it by not chasing it away. We must not let anything take love from us. This is why we are given the commandment to love even our enemies. This is why we fast and deny ourselves. It is thus that we can pray and partake worthily of the Body and Blood of our Lord, for it is Love inside of us Who makes us worthy.

Finally my dear ones in Christ Jesus, love destroys conventional religion for it does not base itself on a set of external principles. External principles restrain and imprison us by force- even the force of our conscience. Our will to do evil is restrained. This is the good of all religions- but it is only preliminary and does not have the power to give us life. Christ is our life. Therefore, beloved, let us who have Christ dwelling in us preserve love at all costs. Let us never use the force of the law in our approach to others, for the law by itself excludes love. That is, let us forgive even the unforgivable. Let us humble ourselves before the proud. Let us become weak before the powerful. Let us pour out our lives for one another, for in doing so we will place ourselves in the arms of Him who said: **"Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. "For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light."** This is the truth that will set us free.Amen.