

[Student's Name]

[Religion Course]

Worksheet 18: Dostoevsky

1. Christ asks mankind to follow his example as shown in Matthew 4:1-12. What is this example? But what do most men really want?

In Matthew 4, Jesus is tempted by the Spirit in the wilderness after 40 days of fasting. The Spirit tells Jesus to turn stones into bread to feed himself, but Jesus declares, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." The Spirit then leads Jesus to the highest point of the temple and tempts him to leap, taking advantage of the fact that God will not let the fall harm Jesus. Jesus declines again. In the third and final test, the Spirit offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship, but Jesus declares unwavering obedience to God.

Christ asks mankind to follow this example, but the Grand Inquisitor realizes that those three questions better reflect man's innermost needs. In reality, most would prefer the security of bread and knowing who to worship; it ends the agony of having free choice in all matters. Jesus offers freedom and loves humanity, so he hopes that others will embrace his teachings. However, most people are feeble-minded and suffer as a result of this freedom. The Grand Inquisitor seeks to take away that misery.

2. Analyze the Grand Inquisitor's corrections of Christ's example concerning the three temptations in the wilderness.

The Grand Inquisitor believes that Jesus chose wrongly, to the detriment of his mortal human subjects. In the first question, choosing bread would have "satisfied the universal and everlasting craving of humanity—to find someone to worship" (27). Humans feel tortured by the lack of a universal community, and Jesus renounced that possibility in the name of freedom.

By declining the Spirit's request for a miracle, Christ relinquished one of the most important sources of human captivation and obedience. According to the Grand Inquisitor, "man seeks not so much God as the miraculous" (29). On the cross, Jesus refused to come down when skeptics told him to, because he did not seek to enslave man with miracles, again in the name of freedom. This shows too much respect for mankind, for treating people as moral equals to Jesus asks too much of them.

In refusing worldly power, Christ effectively delegates the matter to rebellious and unhappy human subjects when he could have instead created a final, universal kingdom with peace on earth. This again forces humans to make free choices that they cannot happily manage.

3. In what way does the elite (Catholic priesthood) sacrifice its happiness for the sake of the herd?

The priesthood knows that freedom makes man unhappy, so it undertakes the difficult task of making choices on behalf of man, all in the name of God. They do the difficult work that Jesus was too noble to do because they pity humanity and wish to provide happiness. The Grand Inquisitor explains that "they will be glad to believe our answer, for it will save them from the great anxiety and terrible agony they endure at present in making a free decision for themselves...only we, who guard the mystery, shall be unhappy" (33).

4. Why does the Grand Inquisitor believe that he loves mankind more than does Christ?

The Grand Inquisitor believes this because he is actually willing to take action for humanity. Christ puts an impossible burden on man by asking him to live as He lived; this is a cruel grant of freedom because by and large, men are weak and rebellious. They do not know what is best for themselves and suffer from having to determine it. The Grand Inquisitor has thus made a sort of Faustian bargain in gaining access to this knowledge of the human condition: “he saw that it is no great moral blessedness to attain perfection and freedom, if at the same time one gains the conviction that millions of God’s creatures have been created as a mockery, that they will never be capable of using their freedom...Seeing all that, he turned back and joined—the clever people” (35).

5. The Grand Inquisitor makes several powerful accusations against Christ. Are they justified?

A) The Christ of all the people is really only a Christ for the chosen few.

This is true on multiple levels. First, only an elect few can live up to Christ’s teachings, because the ethics of Christ require a degree of inner strength and benevolence that few can achieve. Second, humans must live with their uncertainty over what Christ wanted from them, or how to fully understand and live his teachings. Jesus promised he would return soon, but for fifteen centuries these people have agonized over their newfound freedom. Finally, there are the practical and worldly concerns that come up whenever any evangelical claims that people have a duty to embrace Christ in order to achieve salvation. What happens to the people born in the wrong place or who live through political turmoil and never get to affirm the good news?

B) The Christ who had come to suffer for all mankind has in effect come only to increase man’s suffering.

The elect few who can grapple with Christ’s teachings may feel redeemed, but the vast majority of us are sinners who live under the weight of Christ’s impossible demands. Christ ignores the perspective of the weak, or who need his blessings the most.

C) The Christ of compassion and love is really the Christ of indifference and unconcern.

Christ preaches infinite love and compassion, but his neglect for worldly human needs and uncertainties makes him cold and distant. This again is apparent in his fifteen centuries of apparent absence: humanity’s plight has not resolved itself and Christ has not deemed it necessary to clarify his teachings or provide for suffering humans.

6. What is the meaning of Christ’s only response to the Grand Inquisitor’s accusations?

After quietly listening to the Grand Inquisitor’s condemnation, Christ responds by silently kissing the old man. At this point, “the old man shuddered” (36) and told him to leave and never return. Christ’s response is best understood as an affirmation of the freedom for which he peacefully died. This gesture offers a powerful critique of the utopian Enlightenment ideal, or of any belief system that attempts to eliminate human suffering through rational management. Any society founded purely on reason will become cruel and impersonal, just like the Grand Inquisitor’s world. Christ represents a choice to endure a painful and harrowing existence because of what inevitably occurs when that freedom no longer exists.