

A Lenten Parish Group Study

The Brothers Karamazov

This booklet provides weekly reading assignments from Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel with Scripture and discussion questions for parish small groups during Great Lent.

Opening and Closing Prayer of St. Ephraim

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk.

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant.

Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother, for Thou art blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.

Major Themes

- Faith vs. Doubt
- Free Will and moral responsibility
- Suffering and redemption
- Family conflict and forgiveness

Character Guide

MEN

Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov – crude, selfish and immoral father whose murder drives the story

Dmitri (Mitya) Karamazov – **Passionate**, impulsive eldest son in conflict with his father over money and love

Ivan Karamazov – **Intellectual**, skeptical middle son who struggles with faith, doubt, morality, and responsibility

Alexi (Alyosha) Karamazov – **Compassionate, spiritual** youngest son. Moral center of the novel and follower of Elder Zossima

Grigory and Marfa – husband and wife and longtime servants of Fyodor

Pavel Smerdyakov – cook in Fyodor’s house, raised by Grigory and Marfa. Believed to be Fyodor’s illegitimate son. Quiet, resentful, philosophical and central to the mystery

Pytor Alexandrovitch (Miusov) Cousin of Mitya. spent time in Europe gaining enlightened ideas

WOMEN

Grushenka Svetlova – Loved by Dmitri and desired by Fyodor. Charming and unpredictable

Katerina Ivanovna (Katya) – Proud and intense. Engaged to Dmitri but emotionally tied to Ivan

Madame Khokhlakov - a wealthy, widowed socialite and friend of Katerina Ivanovna and mother to the wheelchair-bound Lise.

Lise Khokhlova - – Young girl of little faith and devoted to Alyosha – innocence mixed with emotional turmoil

Lizaveta Smerdyashchaya – Homeless woman and mother of Pavel Smerdyakov

Agafya Ivanovna - the elder half-sister of Katerina Ivanovna and the eldest daughter of the old colonel from his first marriage

RELIGIOUS FIGURES

Elder Zossima – Wise and compassionate monk and Alyosha’s spiritual guide

Fr. Païssy - learned hieromonk and a devoted, senior follower of the elder Zossima. Following the death of Father Zossima, Father Païssy becomes a spiritual guide to Alyosha Karamazov

Fr. Ferapont – Strict ascetic monk who distrusts Zossima’s teachings.

Rakitin - son of a priest and a seminary student and deeply cynical. Supposed friend of Alyosha.

Week 1: Broken Families and the Search for God

- Book I: Chapters 1–5 (The Karamazov Family, first gathering)
- Book II: Chapters 1–6 (The monastery and Elder Zossima)

Group Discussion Questions

1. What forms of disorder do we see in the Karamazov family and how does this echo modern life?

Emotional instability, immorality, spendthrift (Dimitri) and grand idealism (Ivan). The father, Fyodor Pavlovich, is selfish, sensual, irresponsible and perpetual liar. Self-described buffoon. Abandons his eldest son. Alyosha is sensitive, contemplative and desirous to be obedient.

2. Many saints refer to themselves as “Fools for Christ.” How does this compare to Fyodor’s buffoonery?

Although some of the foolish things Fyodor did were similar (but not as extreme as some of the saints) the reason was opposite. Fyodor did them to point to himself and gain attention (chapter 2) whereas the saints did it to radically bring attention to the immoral and vain behavior of the people around them and they were careful that their actions were never arbitrary or without purpose.

3. Why is the absence of a true father spiritually destructive?

Proverbs 22:6 says, *“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”*

Ephesians 6:1–4 St. Paul specifically encouraged fathers writing, *“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”*

Many of the Patristic Fathers taught on the role of parents specifically the father saying, *“The father should teach, and also be the first example in obedience to God’s will.”*

4. How does Elder Zossima redefine authority and obedience?

He confronts people with what they know about themselves (pg. 27), evident in how he deals with the woman whose son died and left her husband (pg. 30), Lise who loves only when loved back, (pg. 36) and the arguing between Fyodor and Miusov . Zossima exhibits patience and a degree of sternness (when required)

5. What should we make of Ivan's speech on his article on the relationship between the Church and the State? And what does Fr. Païssy mean when he accuses Ivan of "ultramontanism."

The Church should not seek to having the State set aside a corner for her to occupy, like every social organization, but that every earthly State should in the end be transformed into the Church thus rejecting every purpose incongruous with the aims of the Church. (pg. 40)

Zossima counters with the reality that *"Christian society itself is not yet ready . . . [but is] will continue unshaken in expectation of Her complete transfiguration from a society as still almost heathen, into one universal and sovereign Church. And so be it, so be it, if only at the end of time, for this alone is destined to be fulfilled! ...And there is no need to trouble oneself with time and seasons, for the mystery of times and seasons is in the wisdom of God, in his foresight, and in his love."* (pg. 42)

Ultramontanism - a 19th century term referring to the Catholic belief in the Pope's supreme authority. From *ultra montes*; beyond the Alps/mountains. Advanced by Gregory VII who asserted that the Pope was God's sole vicar on earth, with authority over all Christians.

However, Father Païssy clarifies that this is akin to Satan's 3rd temptation to Christ (Matt 4:8). Ivan was not saying that the Church becomes the State (Roman model), but that the State is transformed into the Church and will rise to the level of the Church (the Orthodox model).

6. Do any of the characters thus far exhibit repentance for their behavior? What does real repentance require beyond confession and how does the Prayer of St. Ephraim guide us towards repentance?

Thus far it seems that they outwardly display repentance but are truly not repentant which Fyodor brings out in his buffoonery. Their motive for repentance is justification for oneself, realizing some abstract idea of goodness, or of receiving a reward in some future life.

True repentance recognizes that just as the strength of God is revealed in the extreme vulnerability of His Son on the Cross, so also the greatest strength of man is to embrace his weakness: (2 Corinthians 12.9).

It involves not mere regret of past evil but a recognition of a darkened vision of a person's own condition, in which sin, by separating him from God, has reduced him to his natural existence, depriving him of both the glory of his God-given image and likeness. According to St. Basil, "Repentance is salvation, but lack of understanding is the death of repentance."

7. After the argument between Fydor and Dimitri Fr. Zossima moved towards Dimitri and fell to his knees before him in a deliberate bow till his head touched the floor and then left saying "Good Bye, forgive me all of you." **What is the meaning of this?**

Week 2: Freedom, Passion, and Responsibility

- Book III: Chapters 1–11 (Dmitri and the tyranny of passion)
- Book IV: Chapters 1–7 (Ivan’s reason and Alyosha’s listening heart)

Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you think are the meaning of the following symbols
 - a) Dimitri’s description of the Karamazovs as “insects”
 - b) Katerina kissing Grushenka’s hand
 - c) Grushenka not kissing Katerina’s hand
 - d) Smerdyakov referred to as Balaam’s ass
 - e) Ivan referring to his father as Aesop
 - f) Ivan’s comment of “vipers eating their own”
2. How does Dostoevsky portray freedom as both gift and burden?
3. Which passions are most easily excused in our own lives?

CHAPTER SUMMARIES of BOOK III

Chapter 1 Opens with the background of Fyodor’s servants Grigory and Marfa whom, against the pleadings of his wife, Grigory was dedicated to Fyodor in spite of how Fyodor treated him. The servant couple had a child which was born with a deformity that the superstitious Grigory referred to as a “dragon.” Later Grigory, responding to a noise in their garden, he found the child of the wandering Lizaveta and took him from the dying Lizaveta.

Chapter 2 Provides the background of Lizaveta including the night that Fyodor and his drunken companions encountered Lizaveta in a “backway.” When later Lizaveta became pregnant most of the town suspected Fyodor as the father. Lizaveta was cared for by a well-to-do merchant’s widow and when the child was born and Lizaveta died Grigory and Marfa took the child and raised him. He was named Smerdyakov by Fyodor and ended up becoming a servant to Fyodor.

Chapter 3 Alyosha remains obedient to his father and stays with him rather than return to the monastery. He is anxious about going to visit Katerina Ivanovna after having received an invitation from her given to Alyosha by Madame Hohlakov. On the way to see her Alyosha encounters Dimitri who proceeds to confess to Alyosha, comparing his actions to Schiller’s poem *Hymn to Joy*.¹ He tells Alyosha his history of seducing women, spending money with

¹ Written in 1775 by Friedrich Schiller's "Ode to Joy" (An die Freude) is a poem urging humanity to a universal brotherhood, joy, and a divine creator, famously set to music by Beethoven in the finale of his Ninth Symphony.

abandon. He refers to two ideals regarding man's actions, 1) acting with "sensual lust that God gave to insects," and the mind of man in tension with the Madonna ideal vs. the Sodom ideal.

Chapter 4 While Dimitri continues to relate the details of his wild life, Alyosha shocks him by saying "...I am the same as you." Dimitri relates details of his exploits during his military service where he meets Katerina, his commander's second daughter. He tells of the new commander who asked Katerina's father for the Government money that he had spent. Katerina goes to plead with Dimitri (who had recently received the balance of his inheritance from his father) to loan her the money to save her father. Dimitri, after almost succumbing to "insect lust" gives her the money to which she offers the "low bow" to him.

Chapter 5 The situation with Katerina's father is resolved without incident however her father dies shortly after but Katerina's fortune changes as she inherits 80,000 rubles from the nieces of a general's widow. Dimitri receive from Katerina a letter containing 4000 rubles and a proposal for marriage. Dimitri writes back to Katerina and also to his brother Ivan about Katerina with whom Ivan fell in love with. Dimitri then tells Alyosha that he loves Grushenka and that he wants Alyosha to take the message to Katerina that "he shall never come to see her again." Katerina gives Dimitri 3000 rubles to give to Agafya Ivanovna (older half-sister of Katerina) but he squanders it and plans to repay it by getting the money from his father, Fyodor from which Dimitri feels that his father has a moral obligation to give him the money. At the end of the chapter is the hint that if his father declines to give him the money Dimitri could be moved to murder his father.

Chapter 6 Alyosha returns to his father's house to find his father (on the way to being drunk), Ivan, the servants and the child Smerdyakov, who Dimitri refers to as "Balaam's ass."² Fyodor sends Smerdyakov to Moscow to be trained as a cook and he returns to take over cooking duties in spite of his epileptic seizures.

Chapter 7 Grigory related a story about a Russian soldier who as a prisoner in Asia was forced to renounce his faith with the threat of torture and death to which he refused and was martyred. Smerdyakov responds to all present the story with the philosophical notion that if the soldier had renounced his faith there would be no sin.

"For as soon as I say to those enemies, 'No, I'm not a Christian, and I curse my true God,' then at once, by God's high judgment, I become immediately and specially anathema accursed, and am cut off from the Holy Church, exactly as though I were

² Balaam's ass refers to the story in Numbers 22 where the prophet Balaam was prevented from traveling with the Moabite officials when his donkey, avoiding an angel of the Lord refused to go further. After beating the donkey, the donkey spoke saying, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" Here Smerdyakov as the lowly servant is typically silent, but when he does speaks philosophically.

a heathen, so that at that very instant, not only when I say it aloud, but when I think of saying it, before a quarter of a second has passed, I am cut off...“And if I’ve ceased to be a Christian, then I told no lie to the enemy when they asked whether I was a Christian or not a Christian, seeing I had already been relieved by God Himself of my Christianity by reason of the thought alone...If I’m no longer a Christian, then I can’t renounce Christ, for I’ve nothing then to renounce.”

To Grigory’s protest of the fallacy of Smerdyakov’s comment, Smerdyakov uses the argument of the “faith of the mustard seed” to show that Grigory’s faith is as weak as his and that “that though I may once have doubted I shall be forgiven if I shed tears of repentance,” meaning that a person who renounces his faith to save his life can repent for his sin later. Though he seems to be arguing with Grigory, this argument seems to be directed more to the atheist Ivan.

Chapter 8 Fyodor moves the conversation from Smerdyakov’s ideas to Ivan’s with the question of God’s existence and immortality setting Ivan and Alyosha at odds. By this time Fyodor was drunk and began to speak ill of Alyosha’s mother (Fyodor’s second wife). This upset Alyosha terribly and Ivan angrily reminded Fyodor that she was also his mother which Fyodor seemed to forget. The chapter ends with Dimitri entering and Fyodor screaming, “He’ll kill me...Don’t let him get at me.”

Chapter 9 Dimitri runs into the room convinced that Grushenka is hiding somewhere in Fyodor’s house. Fyodor accuses Dimitri of stealing from him and Dimitri attacked his father being pulled off by Ivan and Alyosha. Ivan likens to his father to Aesop (a reference to the 5th BC Greek storyteller who was cunning, clever, and described as deformed). And hints at either Dimitri or Fyodor doing the other in, saying, ““One reptile will devour the other.”

Fyodor admits to Alyosha that he is also afraid of Ivan as well as Dimitri and that he wants Grushenka for himself sending Alyosha to find out “which she means to choose.” On the way Alyosha meets Ivan where he asks the question, “does any man a right to look at other men and decide which is worthy to live?”

Chapter 10 Alyosha visits Katerina at Madame Khokhlakov’s house and is surprised to find that Grushenka is also there. After realizing Katerina’s beauty Alyosha recalls his words to Dimitri, “perhaps you will love her forever. But perhaps you won’t always be happy with her.” Alyosha discovers that Katerina already knew that Dimitri had spent the 3000 rubles she gave him and that she still wants Dimitri. Alyosha then relates the altercation between Dimitri and his father and that Dimitri was looking for Grushenka, which Katerina dismisses as “passion, not love.”

At this, Grushenka appears from behind a curtain after which Alyosha is unconsciously affected by her beauty. The complimentary conversation between the two women is clearly meant to hide their disdain for one another. Katerina states that Grushenka has just promised her that

she is going to leave Dmitri but Grushenka says that she made no such promise and even if she did she is “changeable.” Earlier Katerina kissed Grushenka’s hand and when it came time for the reverse, Grushenka did not reciprocate saying “do you know, after all, I think I won’t kiss your hand...So that you may be left to remember that you kissed my hand, but I didn’t kiss yours.” When Katerina tells Grushenka to leave calling her “A creature for sale,” Grushenka reminds Katerina that she also brought her beauty for sale (referring to the time she came to Dimitri for the loan to save her father). Alyosha leaves but on the way out is handed a pink envelope by Madame Hohlakov.

Chapter 11 As he returns to the monastery, Alyosha is again stopped by Dmitri, who while shocked that both women were there laughs at Grushenka’s behavior and recognizes Katerina’s pride and recklessness at inviting Grushenka against the advice of her aunts. When Alyosha confronts Dmitri that he insulted Katerina by disclosing to Grushenka what happened when Katerina came to him about the loan he is suddenly remorseful and makes one more confession of his past to Alyosha.

At the monastery that night, Alyosha discovers that Zosimo’s health is rapidly deteriorating, and is near death. There is discussion about some of Zosimo’s questionable practices such as the “general confession” which some felt is profaning the sacrament of confession. Fr. Paissy reminds Alyosha of the “duty” that Fr. Zosimo placed on him and that Alyosha was to leave the monastery for a time but that he would return. Alyosha decides to disobey and remains with Zossima, whom he loves like a father, instead of returning to help with his family’s conflict.

As he prepares to go to sleep, he reads the letter in the pink envelope he discovers is from Lise and contains a confession of her love for him. She writes that she hopes to marry Alyosha one day. Alyosha laughs happily, says a prayer for all his troubled loved ones and falls into a peaceful sleep.

Book IV: Chapters 1–7 (Ivan’s reason and Alyosha’s listening heart)

Chapter 1 Father Zossima is dying and Fr. Paissy offers him the sacraments of Holy Communion and Holy Unction. His devoted brothers gather around his bed where he reminds them of the monastic responsibility. He tells them that the crown of life for all monastics is that they are not merely responsible for theirs’ alone but bear responsibility for all man’s sins both national and individual and everything on earth. He offers them a prayer, *“Save O Lord all those who have non to pray for them and save those who will not pray.”*

Rakitin gives Alyosha a letter from Madame Hohlakov which relates an incident where a sergeant’s widow asked Fr. Zossima if she could pray for the rest of the soul of her son who was lost for over a year as she feared him dead. Fr. Zossima forbade her to do so and told her that her son was indeed alive and would contact her shortly with a letter.

Many of his devoted brothers anticipate some miracle from Father Zossima, except a few detractors such as Father Ferapont. Fr. Ferapont, a severe ascetic, is antagonistic towards Fr. Zossima as he disapproves of his institution of “elders” which he regarded as a new and heretical innovation and was able to persuade several of the monks to his way of thinking. We get more of an insight into Fr. Ferapont when a monk from the neighboring Obdorsk monastery visits Fr. Ferapont who tells him about his ascetic practices, his battles with demons and that he has witnessed the Holy Spirit.

Father Zossima tells Alyosha that his place is not in the monastery but alongside his brothers and father as they need his help more than the monastery does. Before Alyosha leaves Fr. Paissy speaks with him in such a warm and tender manner that it surprises Alyosha setting the stage for Fr. Paissy to step into the role of Spiritual Father.

COMMENTARY This chapter provides an excellent explanation of the purpose of Orthodox monasticism through the words of Fr. Zossima and that as Christians we are all called upon to *pray for those who love us and those who persecute us* (Matt. 5:44). Fr. Ferapont provides that reality that even in the monasteries there can be dissension and differing ways. Fr. Ferapont’s character also informs the reader of the truth of the constant battles that go on in the monasteries between the monks and the demons.

Chapter 2 When he goes back to town, Alyosha finds his father sitting by himself. Fyodor says he wants to live much longer and needs to be frugal in order to save his money to continue his lifestyle of debauchery and possibly marry Grushenka. This is also why he will not give Dimitri any more money and is suspicious of the motives of his son Ivan.

COMMENTARY Chapters 1 and 2 present Alyosha’s two strongest father figures in his life. Both talk of old age, of dying, and of what Alyosha should do with himself. While the men have a parallel relationship regarding Alyosha, though they are quite different. Father Zossima is most

concerned about the welfare of his disciples and Alyosha, Fyodor talks mostly about personal satisfaction. Zossima wants to make sure he has spread the word about living with love and understanding to as many people as he can before he passes; Fyodor is only concerned with continuing his life of self-pleasure and debauchery.

Chapter 3 Alyosha leaves and sees some schoolboys throwing rocks at a delicate 9-year-old boy, who throws rocks back and then runs away. Alyosha runs after the boy, wondering what would make a nine-year-old so angry and seemingly at Alyosha himself as he seems to know that he is a Karamazov. He questions the young boy, but doesn't answer Alyosha's questions and eventually picks up a rock and hits Alyosha and then severely bites Alyosha's finger, fleeing afterwards leaving a puzzling mystery.

COMMENTARY Alyosha's treatment towards the children; protecting the one boy who is victimized by the other boys and his desire to understand the reason for the victimized boy (who is Cpt Snegiryov son Ilusha) anger. Alyosha even refuses to strike back at the boy when he is bitten. This is Fr. Zossima's influence, who teaches that children are of a purer spirit (as Jesus taught) and not to respond in a vengeful manner, i.e. eye for an eye.

From Ilusha's perspective family honor is of primary importance and the boy wants to assert the feeling that his family has been wronged. He hitting Alyosha in the back is revenge for Dmitri beating up on someone much weaker than himself and biting his finger is a demonstration of the courage against the powerful Karamazov family.

Chapter 4 Alyosha goes to Madame Hohlakov's house to visit Katerina again, but is surprised to find Ivan with her. He asks Madame Hohlakov for something for his bitten hand, and tells Lise of the incident with the schoolboys. Lise asks for her letter back, telling him she wrote it as a prank but Alyosha will not return it telling her that he wishes to marry her.

Chapter 5 Then he talks to Ivan and Katerina. Katerina tells Alyosha she will never leave Dmitri even if he desires Grushenka or marries her. Katerina's pride gets the better of her and to avenge her previous night's behavior she speaks of her love for Dimitri and that if it goes unrequited, she will suffer for him. Provoked by Katerina Alyosha cannot take this anymore, and he tells her that they clearly love each other and should follow their hearts. Ivan says he loves Katerina but that she and Dmitri are more complementary, but Alyosha states that Katerina never loved Dimitri and Dimitri never loved her. Ivan says Alyosha is wrong and that it is Ivan that Katerina never loved and that she used him as revenge. Ivan leaves telling her that he is going to Moscow.

Katerina tells Alyosha about a captain Snegiryov whom Dmitri has beaten badly. She feels very bad about this and takes pity on the man saying that she wants to help him in some way. She gives Alyosha two hundred rubles and asks Alyosha to deliver this money to the man as a token of her sympathy.

COMMENTARY While the novel does not disclose the details of the captain's discharge from the Army, Katerina's empathy for Cpt. Snegiryov comes from her own history with regards to her father's dishonorable behavior while he was in the military seeking to make amends through helping someone in a similar plight.

Chapter 6 When Alyosha arrives he finds Captain Snegiryov living in an old, dilapidated house with his wife and two daughters, one of whom is handicapped, and his son Ilusha. Ilusha immediately recognizes Alyosha as the person whose finger he bit and assumes that he is there to seek restitution for his injured hand. Alyosha suddenly understands the boy's rage against him because he is Dmitri's brother.

Chapter 7 Captain Snegiryov goes outside with Alyosha and tells him how Dmitri traumatized his poor son by witnessing the beating he received from Dimitri and Alyosha reassures Snegiryov that his brother will apologize. He reemphasizes his family's poverty, but goes on to speak of the trauma that his son has endured and the injustice of the rich brought out when in answer to his son's question, "are the rich people stronger than anyone else on earth," he replied "Yes."

Alyosha tells Snegiryov that he came to give him money from a "sister" helping a "brother" in need. The captain is overjoyed at first, telling Alyosha all the ways he can help his family with the money, but he changes his mind suddenly and crumples the money and throws it to the ground. He explains that he cannot dishonor himself by accepting money from the brother of a man who has humiliated him as this would destroy his son. Snegiryov runs off as Alyosha retrieves the money and goes back to Katerina.

COMMENTARY The interesting contrast here is how the novel displays the great chasm that existed in 19th century Russia between the wealthy and the poor. For Cpt. Snegiryov situation 200 rubles will provide not only desperately needed medical supplies but pay for essentials such as good food and care of the house. Whereas Dimitri and his father spend 3000 rubles on unnecessary extravagances which are solely self-serving. Add to that the greed and privilege that Dimitri shows when he insists that his father owes him this inheritance.

Week 3: Power, Christ and the Cross

Book V: Chapters 1–7

SUMMARY and ANALYSIS Chapter 4 - Rebellion

In Book V, Chapter 4, entitled “Rebellion” Ivan Karamazov tells Alyosha one of the horrific and graphic stories recounting a case from the Turkish atrocities in Bulgaria (during the suppression of the 1876 uprising). There are several reasons as to why Dostoevsky presents this in his novel.

1. **Cruelty for Cruelty’s Sake** Dostoevsky is illustrating cruelty for the sake of cruelty through Ivan who emphasizes that human beings derive pleasure from domination and the suffering of the powerless. The soldiers’ behavior shows several things Dostoevsky wants his reader to confront:
 - a) **Dehumanization** – humans treated as an objects solely for self-satisfaction.
 - b) **Sadistic pleasure** – the soldiers intensify the cruelty by first creating joy and trust.
 - c) **The corruption of human freedom** – Free will allows people to choose both good and evil even when there is no benefit.

Ivan’s goal is philosophical, not historical. He refuses to accept a God-created universe built on the suffering of innocent children even if Christianity believes that God will ultimately restore justice, thus he is “**returning the ticket**” to such a world.

This story prepares the way for Ivan’s next chapter **The Grand Inquisitor**. Together they raise the central question of the novel:

- If humans are capable of such evil,
- can freedom, God, and justice coexist?

2. **Betrayal of Innocent Trust** The baby story is deliberately extreme because it highlights the innocence of the victim and the senselessness of the cruelty. The detail that the baby is laughing before it being shot is extremely deliberate as it intensifies the moral and spiritual meaning as a baby is the perfect symbol of innocent trust.

The soldiers betray that innocent trust in a defenseless baby, thus the cruelty is not just murder but a destruction of trust in the world. The baby is the extreme example of the powerless who have little or no defense against evil and its cruelty. Ivan also reveals that its not enough for evil to destroy but evil also mocks goodness.

3. **A Distorted Image of Christ** Throughout Dostoevsky’s work, Jesus portrays children as a symbol of purity of faith and humility. In Matthew 18, Jesus gives three (3) criteria for attaining the kingdom of heaven with each compared to child-like qualities.

- **The Model of Faith:** “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

- **Humility:** “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. He who takes the lowly position of a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
- **Guardian of Trust:** “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. As stewards of all Creation, we are entrusted to guard and protect those who are *“sick, suffering or in captivity.”*

The soldiers’ act thus becomes a **grotesque distortion of Christ’s commands.**

- The soldiers clearly are not the model of a faithful and Christ-like servant
- Trust is destroyed by those who mock it
- The soldiers act contrary to their calling to be guardians and stewards of the lowly.

4. Ivan’s philosophical point is to construct a case against the injustice of suffering saying that If even **one innocent child** must suffer like this for the sake of the world's future harmony, then the price is too high.

Dostoevsky’s deeper purpose is not to endorse Ivan’s conclusion, but instead, to forces the reader to confront the most unbearable form of evil before presenting the Christian answer later in the novel through the characters of Alyosha Karamazov and Elder Zossima.

SUMMARY and ANALYSIS Chapters 5 – The Grand Inquisitor

In a continuation of Ivan’s commentary on the power and authority of the Church (Book II, Chapter 5), Ivan delivers another thesis in the form of a fictitious story which *“is set in Spain in Seville during the most terrible time of the Inquisition that practiced the auto da fé, (act of faith).* Ivan’s story uses a literary device from ancient Greek theater where the gods would descend to Earth to relieve humanity of their suffering.

- **Prometheus** defies Zeus to bring fire to humanity to alleviate man's suffering and bring about civilized existence.
- **Apollo** offers aid to King Admetus, struggling with the fate of his wife, Alcestis. Apollo negotiates with Death to allow a substitute to die to save a human life.
- **In the play Eumenides** the goddess Athena intervenes in humanity by establishing a court of law to judge Orestes, bringing an end to his suffering and the curse on his house.

Ivan uses this literary device in a Machiavellian way to exploit God’s condescension through the Person of Christ to speculate what could happen if God once again appeared on earth where circumstances were such that humanity turned against Him.

In Ivan’s story Christ appears at the height of the Inquisition Era when *“flames were crackling ...on the day before almost 100 heretics had been burned by the Grand Inquisitor.”* Much of Ivan’s story has Christ acting as He did 1500 years ago.

- Christ moves about unobserved (recalling the Messianic Secret) but everyone recognizes Him. (Mark 5:43, 7:36, 8:29)
- He performs many of the same miracles such as healing of the sick and restoring sight to the blind.
- He raises from the dead the only daughter of a prominent citizen, (recalling Christ's healing of the only son of the widow of Nain - Luke 7:11-17)
- In a scene mirroring Christ's trial before the Sanhedrin, the Inquisitor orders his guards to imprison Christ in the palace of the holy court. When the Inquisitor asks, "Is it You?" he receives no response as did Caiaphas when He asked Christ if He was the Messiah (Matt 26:63)

From here on the story deviates from the Gospels to reflect Ivan's ideas of the corrupted institutional power and authority of the Catholic Church. Ivan, through the character of the Inquisitor, several times speaks in total contrast to Christ's teachings.

The cardinal recognizes Christ but tells Him to "*be silent*" adding, "*Why have You come to hinder us.*" Despite being Christian and a clergyman, the cardinal out of true fear of losing power does not welcome the reappearance of Christ as he sees Him as a threat to his power (cf John 11:48-50) and warns Christ that He "*does not have the right to add anything to what He has said of Old.*"

REVERSALS

Christ has Turned over the Church Ivan, through the Inquisitor, believes that when Christ resisted the three temptations from Satan in the desert, he cursed man with freedom and ever since, the church has had to work to reverse the damage. From Ivan's viewpoint this is central to Catholicism where all has been given to the Pope and there is no need for Christ to come now and meddle in the Church's affairs. The implication is that Christ's interference encroaches upon "the freedom of faith" that the faithful have handed over to the Church in exchange for their happiness. This is in opposition to Christ's promise that He would never abandon His faithful and that He would send the Holy Spirit to be with the faithful (John 14:15-18)

Earthly Bread Better than Heavenly Bread In opposition to Christ's words (John 6:58) the Inquisitor asks Christ how can the promise of "heavenly bread," which some have the strength to endure, "compare with earthly bread that feeds the millions who do not have the strength to forego practical food for heavenly bread? The cardinal, who claims to know the fundamental secret of human nature says "these weak who are very dear to the Church who will offer earthly bread to them as the Church." Christ has burdened Man with something beyond their strength; this "something" being to discern for themselves between good and evil and the cardinal accuses Christ of having laid the foundation for the destruction of His kingdom by overestimating humanity's spiritual ability.

The Church Carries the Weak The Inquisitor says that in compassionate love for the weak, who haven't the strength to abide by Christ's commandments, the Church has accepted the people's surrender of their "freedom" in exchange for their happiness. The cardinal accuses Christ of "*thinking too highly of men for they are indeed slaves and rebellious by nature... weaker and more base than You*

believed him to be." This is a complete reversal of what Christ preached, "I no longer call you servants, but instead, I call you friends." (John 15:15)

Let Sin Abound The Inquisitor says that the Church, as a reward for the surrender of the people's freedom, will allow every sin done with the Church's permission and that the Church takes those sins on themselves so that the people will adore them as their saviors.

The Dream of Heaven In a stunning reversal of the most basic of Christian theology, eternal life in the kingdom of God, the Cardinal states that "*Peacefully [the people] will die, peacefully they will expire in Thy name, and beyond the grave they will find nothing but death. But we shall keep the secret, and for their happiness we shall allure them with the reward of heaven and eternity.*"

Ivan ends the poem by telling Alyosha that the entire poem is a fantasy but asks him if "you really think that the Roman Catholic movement of the last centuries is actually nothing but the lust of power, of filthy earthly gain?"

Ivan closes this part of the discussion with an attack against the life of the monks saying, "What if after eating roots in the desert and made frenzied efforts to subdue his flesh to make himself free and perfect. But yet all his life he loved humanity, and suddenly his eyes were opened, and 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.

Why" The Great Inquisitor " is a praise of Jesus (provided by Svetlana Grigoreva)

1. Jesus is a model of the ultimate freedom. In the poem, Jesus is shown as a personality that offers absolute freedom of choice and love, based on faith rather than on miracles. Inquisitor blames Christ for overestimating people by giving them freedom that they do not know how to handle. Therefore, Ivan shows Jesus as the ideal, calling for the highest good, not the earthly.

2. Kiss is the answer to the questions. The kiss that Jesus gives to the Inquisitor is the symbol of absolute love and forgiveness, which ruins the logic of the inquisitor's arguments. This fact is beyond rational arguments.

3. Ivan judges the world, not God. He doesn't accept the world because of the children and human suffering. This riot shows not the absence of faith, but rather the impossibility to combine God's harmony with human suffering. This paradox shows his eagerness to God's truth through denial.

4. "The poem" proves the opposite. Arguments of the inquisitor are so strong and logical that they reveal the lowest of human nature. Human nature cannot live without bread and miracles. Ivan shows Jesus silently accepting this challenge but still loving. It makes the image of Christ even more perfect — in this Alyosha sees justification of Christ.

So, Alyosha sees that Ivan, in trying to rationally deny God, on a deeper emotional and spiritual level, proves the greatness and need of Christ as the ultimate ideal of love.

Week 4: Repentance and Shared Guilt

Book VI: Chapters 1–3 (Teachings of Elder Zossima)

Chapter 1: Father Zossima and his Visitors

1. In Book II, Chapter 6, after the argument between Fyodor and Dimitri, Fr. Zossima moved towards Dimitri and fell to his knees before him in a deliberate bow till his head touched the floor. Here in this chapter we find the meaning behind Fr. Zossima's bow? **What is the meaning of this?**

"I bowed down yesterday to the great suffering in store for [Dimitri]."

2. What are the similarities between Zossima and Alyosha?
 - Both were born into a life of some privilege, family nobility, and wealth.
 - Both have hot-tempered older brother.
 - Zossima, in youth was a soldier like Dimitri, with a brother who helped to redeem him spiritually.
3. How did Zossima's brother Markel impact the Starets' life?

Markel's example later in his life where he appreciates God's creation Markel's message that everyone should be of service to everyone is adopted by Zossima when he enters the monastery and become his lessons as a Spiritual Father.

4. Zossima states that, "precious memories may remain even of a bad home, if only the heart knows how to find what is precious."
5. How does Zossima use the parable of the mustard seed?

To stress the God-inspired effect that Biblical teachings have on a person's faith. *"Only a little tiny seed is needed—drop it into the heart of the peasant and it won't die, it will live in his soul all his life, it will be hidden in the midst of his darkness and sin, like a bright spot, like a great reminder. And there's no need of much teaching or explanation, he will understand it all simply."*

Chapter 2: Father Zossima and the Duel and the Mysterious Visitor

1. How does the "duel" and the crime of the mysterious visitor relate to the Karamazov brothers?

Zossima's youthful duel and the murder committed by the mysterious visitor are both crimes of passion committed for a woman's love, and thus echo the rivalry between Fyodor Pavlovich and Dimitri for Grushenka. In each of the cases it reflects the powerful (and destructive) force of the ego. Zossima believed that he could claim his "love" through violence, as possibly Dimitri and Fyodor will fight for Grushenka.

In the case of the mysterious stranger jealousy is the vice that eventually leads to murder. His sin is increased when he tries to blame the murder on the servant. Zossima was able to overcome his ego and now sees the same forces at work in Dimitri and Fyodor.

Zossima remembered his brother Markel's words to the servants before he died, "Why are they serving him" and was he worthy of being served. Zossima sees the same dynamic between Alyosha and Dimitri.

2. In Zossima's discussion with the Mysterious Stranger, Zossima speaks of science's inability to instill in Mankind consideration and responsibility for one another. In a striking comparison to the Rich Man in Luke 12, Zossima speaks of the fallacy of relying on oneself and cut off from "the whole." Is this Orthodox behavior?

Chapter 3: Father Zossima Final Exhortations

1. The Significance of the Russian monk
2. Can Masters and Servants be brothers in Spirit?
3. Of Prayer and Love
4. Can Man judge his brother?
5. A Mystic Reflection on Hell

Book VII: Chapters 1–4 (The death of Elder Zossima)

1. The Breath of Corruption (The Scandal of Zosima's Decay)

After the death of Elder Zosima, his body decays quickly, producing a foul smell.

Orthodox Insight: Faith must mature beyond dependence on miracles.

- In popular piety, incorrupt relics are sometimes seen as signs of holiness—but Orthodoxy **does not require** physical incorruption as proof of sanctity.
 - The scandal reflects a misunderstanding of holiness as something **externally miraculous**, rather than inward union with God.
 - Is Alyosha's belief based on **signs**, or on **truth and love**?
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2. A Critical Moment (Alyosha's Crisis of Faith)

Alyosha seeks "justice" not miracles but is shaken and tempted toward doubt and despair.

Orthodox Insight: Spiritual trials (πειρασμός) are common to both ascetic and secular life

- Can the faithful experience **desolation**? How is perseverance important?
 - Compare the disciples' actions after the Crucifixion but before the Resurrection.
 - Can doubt play a role in the building up of faith?
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3. An Onion (Temptation Through Grushenka)

Rakitin convinces Alyosha to visit Grushenka who attempts to seduce or emotionally manipulate Alyosha, but the encounter transforms into something unexpected.

Orthodox Insight: Love has transformative power

- Alyosha does not fall into lust; instead, he responds with **compassion and humility**.
 - Grushenka experiences a moment of repentance showing that love can awaken repentance more than judgment
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4. Cana Vision of Galilee

Alyosha has a mystical experience connected to Wedding at Cana.

Orthodox Insight: Christianity is not only about suffering—it is about **joyful communion**

- This vision affirms **joy, celebration, and divine presence in the material world**.
 - It reflects the Orthodox sacramental worldview: **grace transfigures creation**.
 - Elder Zosima appears in the vision, reinforcing the spiritual bond between earthly and heavenly life.
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5. “Active Love” vs Abstract Love

Zosima’s teachings echo throughout Alyosha’s transformation.

Orthodox Insight: Salvation is worked out daily.

- “Active love” is represented by concrete acts of mercy, patience, forgiveness.
 - Contrasts with Ivan’s abstract intellectual struggles (Book 5–6).
 - This reflects emphasis on **Orthopraxis** (active faith) over **Orthodoxis** (thinking faith).
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6. Resurrection Motif

Alyosha falls to the ground, weeps, and rises spiritually renewed.

Orthodox Insight: True faith is encountered through experience, not just reason and philosophy

- His “rebirth” is not intellectual but experiential and relational.
 - This is noted in the Orthodox Baptism service: death to the sinful self and resurrection to new life in Christ.
-

Questions for Orthodox Reflection

1. Why does God allow the scandal of Zosima’s decay?
2. How does Alyosha’s crisis resemble spiritual struggles in real Orthodox life?
3. What is the difference between “active love” and abstract love in your own experience?
4. How does the Cana vision reshape your understanding of holiness and joy?
5. In what ways does Alyosha embody Christ-like humility?

Book VIII: Chapters 1–

1. The Battle Between Flesh and Spirit

Dmitri (Mitya) embodies inner chaos and lives in a state of **spiritual warfare** (the struggle between *passions* and *nous*).

- His impulsiveness reflects domination by the **passions (pathē)**.
- Yet he retains a capacity for **metanoia (repentance)**.

Orthodox lens: No one is reducible to their sin. Even in moral collapse, the image of God remains active.

2. Freedom and Responsibility

Dmitri repeatedly insists he is morally guilty—even before being proven legally guilty.

- He *feels* responsible for evil he intended, even if he didn't commit it.
 - This reflects an Orthodox idea reflected in the Gospel of Matthew (on anger/lust) that sin begins in the heart, not just in action.
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3. Suffering as a Path to Redemption

Dmitri begins to accept suffering not just as punishment but as **purification**.

- His famous willingness to “suffer for all” echoes Orthodox idea of **redemptive suffering which in itself is not salvific but can aid a person towards salvation through metanoia**.
 - See St. Isaac the Syrian on voluntary suffering and humility.
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4. The Mystery of the Human Heart

Dostoevsky shows that a person can commit great sin but yet be capable of sacrificial love.

This reflects Orthodox idea that although humans are fallen, Grace is always present (*theosis*).

How does Dostoevsky distinguish between legal guilt and spiritual guilt?

Book IX: *The Preliminary Investigation*

1. Truth vs. Rationalism

The investigators rely on logic, evidence, and psychology—but miss deeper truth.

- They construct a coherent narrative that is ultimately false.
- This critiques overconfidence in rationalism detached from spiritual insight.

Orthodox Insight: Orthodoxy values reason, tempered by spiritual discernment

2. Confession vs. Self-Justification

Dmitri oscillates between: honest self-accusation and attempts to defend himself

This reflects the Orthodox struggle:

- True repentance = recognition of the sinful self without despair allowing for growth
 - False repentance = either denial, depression or self-hatred
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3. The Nature of Judgment

The legal system seeks external facts and clear causality

Dostoevsky suggests that human judgment is limited and often flawed

Orthodox insight: God sees the full truth of the heart.

Compare with:

- Gospel of John — “judge not according to appearance”
 - teachings of St. John Climacus on refraining from judgment
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4. Collective Responsibility

A major theme in Dostoevsky: “Everyone is responsible for everyone else.”

Even though Dmitri may not be factually guilty does he shares in the moral environment that allowed the crime?

Reflects the Russian idea of Sobornost (соборность). 19th-century Russian theological and philosophical term representing "spiritual community," "togetherness," or "conciliarity". It emphasizes unity in love, rather than authoritarianism or individualistic isolation.

Key Aspects of Sobornost:

- **Theological Meaning:** It is often linked to the Orthodox understanding of the Church as a "catholic" or universal body (from *sobor*, meaning council or assembly).
- *Sobornost* stands in contrast to Protestant individualism and Roman Catholic top-down, external legalistic structures.

- **Reflects the** Orthodox Church idea of councils to discern the will of God through collective consensus, not just the decree of one leader.
 - In Orthodoxy this is seen as a way to combat the loneliness, alienation, and fragmentation in contemporary society
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Week 8: Hope, Memory, and Resurrection

- Book X: Chapters 1–12 (The boys and the final exhortation)
- Epilogue

Group Discussion Questions

- 1 Why does Dostoevsky end with children rather than resolution?
- 2 How does memory become a path to salvation?
- 3 What hope does resurrection offer before death?
- 4 How does brotherhood become redeemed in love?