

CS - 100:  
IN THE BEGINNING - I  
HUMILITY AND SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE



A CORRESPONDENCE COURSE BY  
ST. ATHANASIUS ACADEMY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

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## AN ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY PREFACE

“and what you have heard from me, in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.” 2Ti 2:2

This course needs both the context of the Church and her spiritual guidance. One should not undertake its teachings without both.

Though developed in a monastic context, this book and its accompanying two volumes, can be helpful to anyone, even those who are just beginning to seek and follow Jesus, the Christ. Its primary focus – to draw near to God and be in union with Him – is especially helpful for Christians serious about coming to know God. Its content is enriching and life-changing. It is so deep, things of this world pale in comparison.

This is what these three volumes are about – our progress towards Christian Perfection. And on this path, our hearts will need careful preparation and practiced guidance. This is why it is difficult – near impossible – for us to do this apart from the Church. We need her. For it is here we are able to find her Holy Mysteries; the wisdom of the One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church; guidance of her renown Holy Fathers; the friendship and encouragement of our brothers and sisters, and the prayers of the faithful.

It’s within this context that Christians endeavor to fulfill not only their baptismal vows, but also their commitment to becoming like Christ – the Christ handed down by the Holy Apostles and Seven Ecumenical Councils.

Thus the living application of these teachings and our continued pursuit of God, should be seen as dynamic, symbiotic, and salvific. It does not happen overnight. Consequently, be comforted in knowing not all things can or will be comprehended or accomplished in a single step or stage of life. Therefore, many of the mysteries we are yet able to grasp, will most assuredly, beckon to us sometime later. Thus, this course book should be treasured as a precious reminder, one we should often return to as we grow and mature in our Christian walk with Christ.

## COURSE GOAL:

The one and primary goal of this course is to help the student initiate a path leading toward communion with God and the goals set forth in the Scriptures for our spiritual development -- exemplified in such passages as:

"Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.

For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.

Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:2-11).

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LESSON # 1

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION





## ON BEING PERFECT AS HE IS PERFECT

As sincere Christians, we wish to be whatever God wants us to be -- and ultimately, that means to be perfect. For our Lord commands: "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

And St. Paul tells us, "Do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature" (1 Corinthians 14:20). He also writes, "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, **that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God**" (Colossians 4:12).

And in another place we read, "Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, **let us go on to perfection**, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God" (Hebrews 6:1).

Nor is the command to strive for perfection found only in the New Testament, for we find it also in the Old. In Deuteronomy God says to Israel, "You shall be blameless (**or perfect**) before the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 18:13). David advises his son Solomon, "As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal (**or perfect**) heart and with a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will cast you off forever" (1 Chronicles 28:9).

Consequently, we cannot fail to see that God calls for perfection on the part of Christians -- that is, He wants us to be perfect in all virtues.

**But if we wish to reach such heights, we must first learn what Christian perfection consists of. For if we have not learned this lesson, we may turn off the right path and go off in a totally different direction -- all the while thinking we are progressing toward perfection.**

**Here is the truth we must absorb: the greatest and most perfect thing a human being can ever desire to achieve is to come near to God and dwell in union with Him.**

Some people, those who judge by appearances, say the perfect Christian life consists in carrying out fasts, vigils, prostrations, sleeping on bare earth, and similar severities of the body.

Others will say it consists in saying many prayers at home and attending long services in Church.

Still others think perfection consists entirely of mental prayer, solitude, isolation, and silence.

The majority, however, will say perfection comes only by strictly observing all the rules and practices of the tradition, neither going overboard in excess nor being deficient, but keeping to a sort of "golden moderation."

So, we see that, by and large, people judge perfection by certain practices -- judging perhaps by what they have observed, what they have been taught, or according to their own experiences.

Nevertheless, all the virtues mentioned above do not, in and of themselves, constitute the Christian perfection we are seeking. They are only means and methods designed to help us attain to it in this world. And, they may or may not do so.

There is, of course, no doubt that these things do represent means for helping some people attain perfection in the Christian life. We know this to be true because we see virtuous people practice these virtues – as they should to acquire strength and power against their own sinful tendencies – in order to gain, through these practices, courage to withstand the temptations and seductions of our three main enemies<sup>1</sup>: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Furthermore, in and by these means, properly used and at the right time, they gain spiritual support so necessary to all servants of God, and especially to beginners.

These virtuous people (as appropriate):

- fast to subdue their unruly flesh.
- practice vigils to sharpen their inner vision.
- sleep on uncomfortable surfaces to keep their minds and bodies from becoming soft through too much sleep.
- bind their tongues to silence and go into solitude to avoid even the least enticement to offend the All-Holy God.
- recite prayers, attend Church services, and carry out other acts of devotion in order to keep their minds on heavenly things.
- read of the life, suffering and death of our Lord for the sole purpose of understanding more clearly their own deficiencies and the merciful lovingkindness of God -- and to learn and to desire to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, bearing their cross with self-denial, and to strengthen their love of God, along with deepening their dislike of what they have been.

On the other hand, these same activities may do more harm than good to those who take them as the sole basis of their life and their hope -- or use them independently or inappropriately (remember this essential fact: we each need a spiritual father or guide). Harm, not from the nature of the deeds, but through the fault of those who use them improperly -- giving attention only to the external practice, allowing their heart to be moved only by their own will and the will of the devil. In their case the devil, seeing that they have left the right path, gleefully refrains from interfering with their activities, even allowing them to increase and multiply their efforts in obedience to their vain ideas.

Experiencing certain spiritual stirrings and comforts along with their activities, such people begin to imagine they have already attained to the condition of the angels and feel God Himself is present in them. At times, in fact, engrossed in the contemplation of some abstract and unearthly things, they imagine they have completely transcended this world and have been transported to the third heaven.

Nevertheless, Christians who examine their life and character can clearly see how sinfully such people behave and how far they are from true perfection. As a rule, these people who rely on the righteous deeds they have done as their sole basis of life and hope, display certain discernable characteristics:

- they always wish to be considered better and more important than other people.
- they want their own way and are stubborn in their decisions.
- they are blind in everything concerning themselves, but are very clear-sighted when it comes to examining the words and actions of others.
- If someone else is held by others in the same esteem these people think they enjoy (or should enjoy), they cannot bear it and become openly hostile to that person.
- And if anyone interferes with them in their pious activities, God forbid! They immediately become indignant, boil over with anger, and become quite unlike what they are believed to be.
- If, desiring to bring them to a knowledge of themselves and leading them on the right path to perfection, God sends them afflictions and sickness -- or allows them to be persecuted, which is the means by which He ordinarily tests His true and real servants -- this test immediately shows what is hidden in their hearts and how deeply they are corrupted by pride. For whatever affliction comes upon them, they refuse to bend their necks to the yoke of God's will and to trust in His secret and righteous judgements. They do not want to follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Who humbled Himself and suffered for our sakes. And, they refuse to be humble, to consider themselves the lowest of all creatures, to regard their persecutors as actually good friends, tools of God's generosity toward them and helpers in their salvation.

Thus, it is clear that such people are in great danger. The inner eye of their soul, that is, their "nous"<sup>2</sup>, is darkened, and looking at themselves through it, they see incorrectly. Remembering their external pious works and considering them to be good, they imagine they have already reached perfection, and puffing themselves up, so to speak, they begin to judge others. After this it is impossible for anyone to convert such people -- except through God's special influence. An obvious sinner will turn toward good much more easily than will a secret sinner who hides under the cloak of outwardly external virtues, visible for all others to see.

Now, having seen clearly and definitely that spiritual life and perfection do not consist in these visible virtues of which we have written, we must also learn that it consists in **nothing but coming near to God and union with Him** – as was said at the very beginning. With this is connected a heartfelt realization of the goodness and greatness of God, together with:

- consciousness of our own weaknesses and inability, and our susceptibility to sin;
- love of God and remorse for ourselves;
- humbling ourselves not only before God but also before all people, for the sake of our love of God;
- renunciation of all will of our own and perfect obedience to the will of God;
- and finally, a desire for all the above and its practice with a pure heart to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), from sheer desire to please God -- and only because He Himself wishes it and because we should so love Him and work for Him.

**This is the law of love, which the Holy Spirit Himself has written on the hearts of the faithful!**

This is the self-denial our Savior calls for so earnestly in the Gospels!

This is the blessed yoke of Jesus Christ and His burden that is light!

This is the submission to God's will which our Redeemer and Teacher demands from us both by His word and by His example!

For, did not our Master, the Author of our salvation, our Lord Jesus Christ, tell us to say when praying to the heavenly Father: "Our Father...Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10)? And did not He Himself exclaim on the eve of His suffering and death: "Not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42)! And did not He say of His whole work: "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38)?

Do you now see what all this means, brothers and sisters? Like most sincere Christians you are probably already expressing your readiness and are longing to reach the height of such perfection. **Blessed be your zeal! But prepare yourself for labor, sweat and struggle beginning with your very first steps on the path.** You must sacrifice everything to God and do only His will. Yet you will meet within yourself as many desires as you have powers and wants – desires all clamoring for satisfaction, whether they agree with the will of God or they do not .

Therefore, to reach our chosen aim, we must first curb our own desires, submitting them to the will of God. And, in order to succeed in this, we must constantly oppose all evil in ourself and urge ourself toward good. **In other words, we must ceaselessly fight against ourself and against everything that panders to our sinful passions<sup>3</sup> -- that arouses and supports them. So prepare yourself for this struggle and this warfare, knowing that the crown -- attainment of your desired aim -- is given to none but the most courageous of those who go to war.**

But if this is the hardest of all wars -- since in fighting against ourselves, it is within ourselves that we meet opposition -- victory in it is the most glorious of all. And, what is the main thing, it is most pleasing to God. For if, inspired by devotion, we overcome and put to death our unruly passions -- our lusts and desires -- we will please God more and will work for Him more beautifully than if we whip ourself till we draw blood or exhaust ourself by fasts more than any ancient hermit of the desert.

On the other hand, not even the most magnificent good deed will save us if we remain slaves to our passions. Indeed, whatever work we may undertake, however glorious, will not lead us to our desired aim if we give our passions free rein allowing them freedom to live and act within us.

Finally, if, after learning what constitutes Christian perfection and realizing that to achieve it you must wage a constant cruel war with yourself, you really desire to be victorious in this unseen warfare and be rewarded with a crown, **you must plant in your heart** the following four dispositions and spiritual activities -- arming yourself, as it were, with invisible weapons, the most trustworthy and unconquerable of all, namely:

- a. Do not rely on yourself in the spiritual warfare.
- b. Bear always in your heart a perfect and all-daring trust in God alone.
- c. Strive without ceasing.
- d. Remain constantly in prayer.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Be sure of the definition: In one brief sentence: What is the greatest truth we must come to know about our attaining to Christian perfection?
2. Consider the things many people think the perfect Christian life consists of. Why would they think so? You may wish to consider what Scripture says concerning each of these practices.
3. What is the value of those virtuous practices considered so important? Consider them one-by-one. What role can they play in making us what God wants us to be?
4. What is the danger in misuse of these virtuous practices? What are some signs of their misuse? What danger signs should we look for in ourselves? How can we help ourselves when we see we are in such danger?
5. Consider those qualities of the heart of the individual person; mind, strength, and soul – nous, logos, and spirit – and how you think they maybe connected with our goal? (See Endnote 2)
6. How can we make ourselves ready for the pursuit of Christian perfection, for the unseen warfare?

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LESSON # 2

NEVER RELY ON YOURSELF IN SPIRITUAL WARFARE





## NEVER RELY ON YOURSELF IN SPIRITUAL WARFARE

The nature of our struggle requires of each of us that we learn not to rely on ourself.<sup>4</sup> This requirement, beloved brothers and sisters, is absolutely essential to the victory. You must be certain of this: if you rely on yourself you will be unable to resist the smallest attack of the enemy. Engrave this truth deeply in your spirit and heart.

Despite the weakening of our spiritual and moral powers that resulted from the transgression of our forefather Adam, **we are inclined to think very highly of ourselves**. Even though our daily experience proves to us -- very effectively -- that this opinion of ourselves is false, we continue to believe that we are something -- and, indeed, something very important.

Nevertheless, this spiritual disease of ours -- so difficult for us to grasp and admit -- displeases God more than anything and everything else about us. For it is the first product of our selfishness and self-love -- and the source, **root and cause of all sinful passions**<sup>5</sup>, as well as all our spiritual failures and sinful deeds. **It closes the very door of our spirit, the only opening through which Divine grace can enter, giving this grace no way to come and dwell in us**. And so, we are left without the very grace we need so much. For how can His grace, which comes to help and enlighten us, enter someone who thinks he himself is something great -- that he knows everything and needs no outside help? May God preserve us from this disease and passion of Lucifer!

God severely reprimands those who are under the sway of this passion of pride and self-admiration, saying through the prophet: **"Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight"** (Isaiah 5:21). And the Apostle Paul tells us: "Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion" (Romans 12:16).

Though God abhors this sinful charade and foolishness on our part, there is nothing He loves and desires to see in us more than **a sincere consciousness of our insignificance and inability -- together with a firm and deeply felt conviction that any good we may have in our life comes from Him alone, since He is the source of all good** -- and a recognition that everything truly good, whether a good thought or a good deed, can only come to us from Him.

Therefore, He carefully plants this heavenly seed in the hearts of His beloved friends, urging them **not to hold themselves in esteem nor to rely upon themselves**. Sometimes He does this by means of grace and inner illumination, at other times through difficulties and tribulation from the outside world, at others through unexpected and almost irresistible temptations, and sometimes by other means -- not always discernable by us.

Nevertheless, although the virtue of expecting no good from ourselves and not relying on ourselves is something God works in us, we must still, on our part, make every effort within our power to acquire this frame of mind. Consequently, we offer here four activities by means of which, with God's help, we may finally acquire disbelief in ourself, learning never to rely on ourself in anything:

- a. We must realize our **own lack of ability**, constantly keeping in our mind that by ourself we can do nothing good which is worthy of the Kingdom of heaven. Listen to the words of the wise fathers:
  - Peter of Damascus assures us that "nothing is better than to realize one's weakness and ignorance. And nothing is worse than not to be aware of them" (Philokalia).
  - St. Maximus the Confessor teaches: "The foundation of every virtue is the realization of human weakness" (Philokalia).
  - St. John Chrysostom says: "He alone knows himself in the best way possible who thinks of himself as being insignificant."
  
- b. We must **ask for God's help** in this with fervent and humble prayers, for this is His gift. And if we wish to receive it, we must first install within ourself the conviction that not only have we no such consciousness of ourself, but that we cannot acquire it by our own efforts. Then, standing boldly before Almighty God, in the firm belief that in His great lovingkindness He will grant us this knowledge of ourself -- when and how He alone knows -- we must not let the slightest doubt creep in that we will actually receive it.
  
- c. We must accustom ourself to **be wary**, fearing our innumerable enemies (the devil and his demons), whom we cannot resist for even a short time. Fear:
  - their long experience in battling us,
  - their cunning,
  - their ambushes,
  - their power to assume the appearance of angels of light,
  - their numerous tricks and traps, which they secretly spread on the path of your life of virtues.

- d. If we fall into some transgression, we must **quickly turn to the realization of our weakness and be aware of it.** For God allows us to fall for the very purpose of making us more aware of our weakness -- so that we may learn not only to distrust ourselves, but also, because of our weakness, wish to be distrusted by others as well. Learn this: without such desires it is impossible for this beneficial disbelief in our own abilities to be born and take root within us. And this **disbelief (in ourselves) is the foundation and beginning of true humility** -- since it is based on realization, by experience, of our impotence and unreliability.

From the above, each of us may see how necessary it is for someone who desires **to participate in heavenly light, to know himself.** We also see how God's mercy usually leads the proud and self-reliant to this knowledge through their downfall -- justly allowing them to fall into the very sin from which they think they are strong enough to protect themselves. For in that way He enables them to see their weakness and prevents them from foolishly relying on themselves.

Though this method is very effective, it is also dangerous, and God does not always use it. He does so **only when all the other means we have mentioned (which are easier and more natural) fail to lead us to self-knowledge.** Only then will He allow us to fall into sin, great or small, depending on the degree of our pride, vanity, and self-reliance. Thus, where conceit and self-reliance are absent, such instructive failures do not occur.

Therefore, if you happen to fall, run quickly in your thoughts to humble self-knowledge and a low opinion of and attitude toward yourself, imploring God by persistent prayer to give you true light -- enabling you to **recognize your emptiness and insignificance, confirming in your heart a settled disbelief in yourself** -- lest you fall again into the same or even worse and more destructive sin.

We must add that not only when you fall into some sin, but also when you are afflicted by hardship, tribulation or sorrow -- and especially by a painful and long-lasting bodily illness -- you must understand that **you suffer this in order to acquire self-knowledge, namely the knowledge of your weakness -- and to become humble.** It also is with this purpose and to this end that God allows us to be assaulted by all kinds of temptation from the devil, from other people, and from our own tendencies to sin. St. Paul saw this purpose in the trials and temptations he suffered in Asia Minor, when he wrote: **"We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead"** (2 Corinthians 1:9).

There is one thing more to be added: if you want to realize your weakness from the actual experience of your life, then observe -- not for several days, but for just one -- your own thoughts, words and actions -- what you actually thought, said and did. You will find that **most of your thoughts, words and actions were sinful, wrong, foolish, and bad.** This experiment will make you understand in practice how out-of-sync with God and weak you are in yourself. And if you truly wish yourself well, this understanding will make you feel how foolish it is to expect anything good from yourself or to rely on yourself.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### NEVER RELY ON YOURSELF IN SPIRITUAL WARFARE

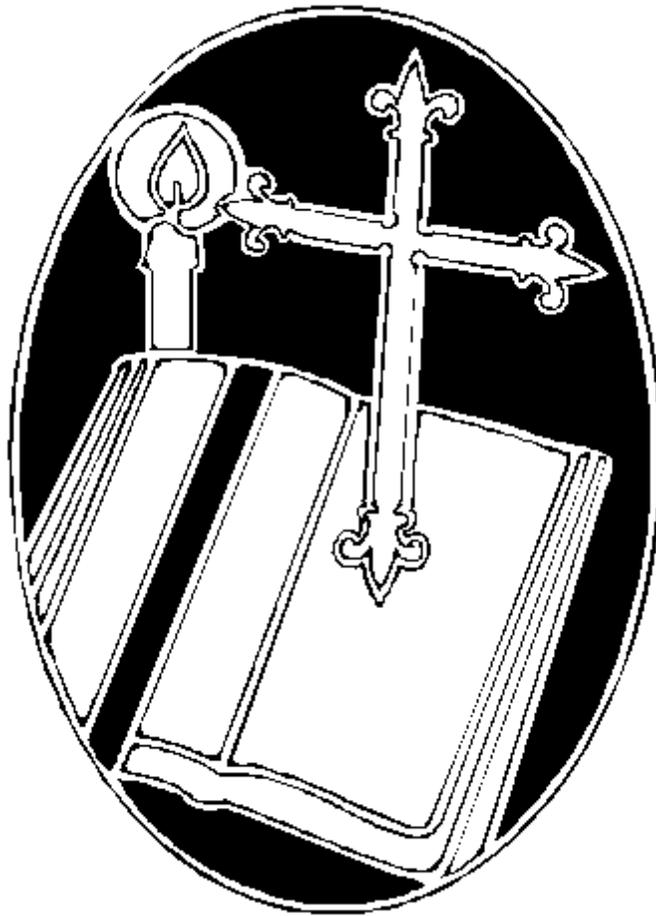
1. What is your first reaction to the advice not to rely on yourself, to esteem yourself insignificant? Does it seem odd that God would want us to consider ourselves inept and unable to make progress toward becoming good?
2. What is the disease discussed? How can it handicap our relationship with God? How can it hinder what God wants to do with us?
3. Consider the four activities given as aids toward acquiring disbelief in yourself. How do these fit together to help you along on this first step of spiritual discovery? Who or what might be some of the enemies in (c)? Can you think how to apply them in your own life?
4. Consider the method given (right after the four a - d) by which God sometimes finds it necessary to get our attention. Why is it dangerous? When does God apply it? What do you especially learn in this section.
5. Think about this: Is our behavior really as bad as the last paragraph of this chapter says? Are you, for example out-of-sync with God (and yourself) in some ways, lacking inner harmony? What should we -- what should you -- do about that?

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LESSON # 3

HOPE AND TRUST IN GOD ALONE





PUT YOUR HOPE IN GOD  
AND MAINTAIN CONFIDENCE IN HIM ALONE

We have said it is very important not to rely on our own efforts in this unseen warfare. Still, if we merely give up all hope of ourselves, despairing of our own abilities to succeed in the spiritual warfare without having found another support base, we have no choice but to immediately flee the battlefield -- or be overcome and taken prisoner by our enemies.

Therefore, along with complete renunciation of our own abilities, we should plant in our hearts a perfect trust in God and absolute confidence in Him. That is, we should know and feel with our whole heart that we have no one but God to rely on -- and that we can expect every kind of good, every means of help, and victory as well, from Him alone.

Since in ourselves we totally lack the capacity to pursue this warfare, we can expect from ourselves nothing but stumbling and falling -- which leaves us no hope of victory. If, on the other hand, we arm our heart with a living trust in God and unshakable certainty that we will receive His help -- according to the Psalm: "The LORD is my strength and my shield; My heart trusted in Him, and I am helped; Therefore my heart greatly rejoices, And with my song I will praise Him" (Psalm 28:7) -- we are certain to always be granted victory by Him.

The following thoughts can help us to become grounded in this hope -- and, thereby prepare us to receive help.

We seek this help from God:

- a. Who is Omnipotent and can do all He chooses. It follows, therefore, that He can certainly help us.
- b. Who, being Omniscient and Wise, knows everything perfectly. He knows, therefore, fully and completely, all that is best for the salvation of each of us.
- c. Who is infinitely Good and Who comes to us with love so profound and perfect as to be indescribable. He always desires, and is ready from hour-to-hour and moment-to-moment to give us all the help we need for complete victory in the spiritual warfare taking place within us -- as soon as we run with firm trust to the protection of His arms.

And consider: how is it possible that our Good Shepherd, Who:

- for the three years He walked the earth searched for sheep who had gone astray,
- calling for them so loudly that, so to speak, His throat became parched,
- meanwhile following paths so hard and thorny that He shed all His blood and gave up His life;

how is it possible, I repeat, that now, if His sheep:

- follow Him,
- turn to Him with love,
- and call for His help with hope,

He should fail to:

- turn His eyes to that lost sheep,
- take it into His divine arms,
- and, placing it among the heavenly angels,
- make a welcoming feast for its sake?

If our God never ceases to search diligently and lovingly for the blind and deaf sinner (like the woman who searched for the piece of silver in the Gospel [Luke 15:8-10]), how is it possible to suppose He would abandon that poor sinner now, when, like a lost sheep, he cries out for his Shepherd?

Who, indeed, will ever believe that God, Who according to John's Revelation, constantly stands at the door of our heart and knocks, wishing to come in and dine with us (Rev. 3:20), and bestow gifts upon us -- who will believe that this same God will be deaf and refuse to enter if we open to Him the door of our heart and invite Him in?

We must therefore add to the above three (a, b, and c) a fourth method of bringing to life within us a firm trust in God -- and of attracting His speedy help:

- d. That method is to review in our memory all the instances of speedy divine help described in the Scriptures. And these instances, which are so numerous, show us clearly that no one who put his trust in God was ever left ruined, perplexed, defeated, and without help. "Consider the generations of old," says the wise Sirach, "has anyone trusted in the Lord and been disappointed?" (Ecclesiasticus 2:10).

Armed, then, with all four of these weapons, we may enter the battle with courage and wage war watchfully, with full conviction that victory will be granted. For with their help we will most certainly acquire perfect trust in God -- and this trust will never fail to:

- attract God's help,
- and provide us with unconquerable power.

These two together will, in the end, cause complete distrust of ourself to become deeply rooted within us.

We are taking every possible occasion in this chapter to remind us to distrust ourself, for we know no one who does not need that reminder constantly, since:

**Self-esteem is so deeply rooted in us, and so firmly enmeshed in us -- making us think we are something, and that something important -- that it always hides in our heart, a subtle and imperceptible presence, even when we are sure we do not trust ourselves and are, on the contrary, filled with complete trust in God alone.**

In order to avoid this foolish pride of heart and act without any self-reliance, led only by your trust in God, always take care to maintain an attitude in which the consciousness and feeling of your weakness are in the forefront of your awareness as you contemplate the all-powerfulness of God. And keep both alike before you in everything you do.

#### HOW TO KNOW WHETHER WE ARE RELYING ON OURSELVES OR TRUSTING GOD

People who are relying on themselves in spiritual warfare often think they have no self-reliance -- that they have put all their trust in God, resting confidently in Him alone. But in practice it is far different. We can see the truth ourselves if we judge by what we are like inside and by what happens there if we fall down. If, when we grieve at our downfall, reproaching and scolding ourselves for it, we think: "I shall do this and that, then the consequences of my downfall will be wiped out and everything will be alright once again," this is a sure sign that before our downfall we trusted ourselves, instead of trusting God. And are continuing to do so!

Actually, the more gloomy and depressed we are in our grief, the more it can be seen that we relied too much on ourselves and too little on God. When that is the case, the grief caused by our downfall is not moderated by any comfort. On the other hand, if we do not rely on ourselves but put our trust in God, when we fall we are not greatly surprised, nor are we overcome with excessive grief, for we know that this fall is the result of our own impotence -- and above all of the weakness of our trust in God.

Thus, our downfall increases our distrust of ourself and makes us try even harder to increase and deepen our humble trust in God.

And further, hating the corrupt passions<sup>6</sup> which caused our downfall, we undergo peacefully and calmly the work of repentance necessary for having offended God. Armed with still more trust in God, we pursue our enemies with the greatest of courage and resolve -- even unto death.

Let us reflect carefully on these truths – especially if we think ourselves virtuous and spiritual (we know if we do!), and especially if, when we fall into some sin, we are overcome with anxiety and torment, finding no peace anywhere. Exhausted by this grief and anxiety -- which we suffer for no other reason but self-esteem – we run, again urged by self-esteem, to our spiritual father, to be freed of this burden. The fact is, we should have done this immediately after the downfall, for no other reason but a desire to wash away as quickly as possible the filth of sin which has offended God -- and to acquire new strength to fight against ourself by means of the most holy sacrament of repentance and confession.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the ways in which distrust in our own abilities to succeed in the spiritual warfare and trust in God are corollary (naturally accompany and parallel) to each other.
2. How do the a, b, and c thoughts assist us in preparing our hearts to trust God?
3. What does the image of Christ as Good Shepherd do to help you learn to trust Him and turn to Him for help?
4. Consider the parables of Jesus relating to His seeking for the lost -- especially those in Luke 15:1-7, Luke 15:8-10, and Luke 15:11-32. How do these help you to feel secure in His love? Are there ways in which they also inspire you to turn to Him for hope and help?
5. Discuss the image of Christ in Revelation 3:20 and what it means to you in terms of trusting Him to guide and help you.
6. Choose and discuss at least one instance "of speedy divine help described in the Scriptures" in terms of development of confidence in God on your part.
7. What is one sure sign that we are relying on ourselves rather than on God? How does trust in God change this?
8. How does our response to a fall affect our future trust in God?
9. What is the value of immediately seeking the sacrament of repentance and confession when we fall?

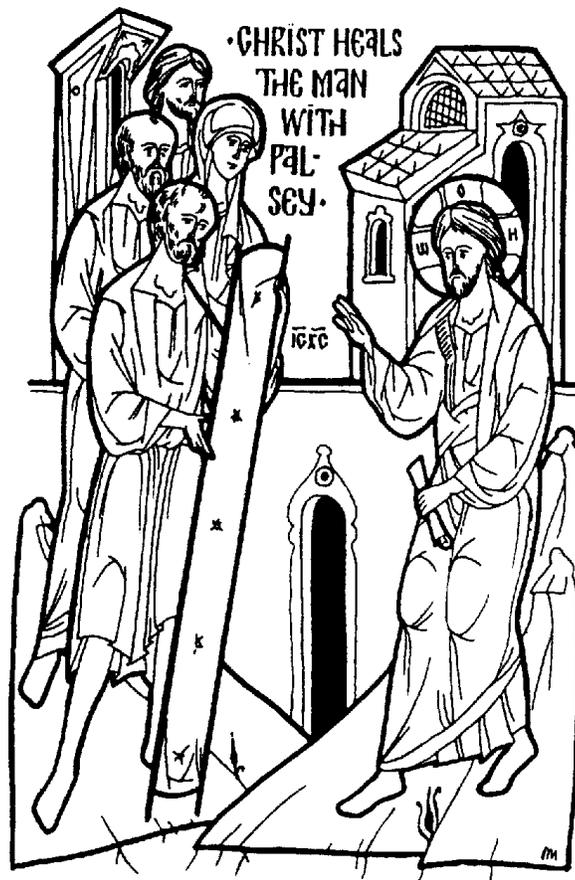


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# *In The Beginning* Humility & Spiritual Guidance

LESSON # 4

THE PROPER SCOPE OF SELF-DISTRUST





## THE MISTAKE OF CONSIDERING EXCESSIVE GRIEF A VIRTUE

It is wrong to regard as a virtue that excessive grief we sometimes feel after committing a sin -- not realizing it is caused by pride and a high opinion of ourselves, based on too much reliance on ourselves and our own powers. Thinking we are advanced in spiritual strength and virtue, we undertake too much, hoping to deal with it ourselves.

When the experience of our downfall shows how weak we are, we are astonished -- like people who have met up with something totally unexpected. And we are thrown into inner turmoil, becoming faint-hearted. Why? Because we have seen, fallen flat on the ground, that graven image within ourselves upon which we have put all our hopes and expectations.

This will not happen to us if we trust in God alone, expecting nothing good from ourselves. Then, when we fall into some transgression, we certainly feel the weight of it and grieve, but we are not thrown into turmoil -- and we are not perplexed. We know our fall happened because of our own weakness -- and the experience of downfalls as a result of that weakness is nothing unexpected or new to us.

## THE PROPER SCOPE OF SELF DISTRUST

Since all our strength for overcoming our enemies is acquired through disbelief in ourselves and trust in God, it is necessary for us to acquire exact knowledge about this process. This will help us always to have that strength and to preserve it with the help of God. We must understand, and never forget, that

- neither all our capabilities and good qualities, whether natural or acquired,
- nor all the gifts freely given us,
- nor the knowledge of all the Scriptures,
- nor the fact that we have long worked for God and have acquired experience in all these labors,
- nor even all this together, will enable us to rightly do God's will, if;
- at every good deed pleasing to God, which we are about to undertake,
- at every affliction we wish to avoid,
- at every cross we have to bear according to God's will,

if, on all these occasions -- and similar ones -- a special divine help does not inspire our heart to give us strength to accomplish it, as the Lord said: "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Therefore, for the rest of our life, every day and every moment, we must keep unchanged in our heart the feeling, conviction, and frame of mind that never -- on any occasion -- can we allow ourselves to think of relying on and trusting in ourselves in this spiritual warfare.

With respect to trust in God, we may add the following to that given in Chapter Three:

**we must know and understand that nothing is easier for God than to give us victory over our enemies -- whether they be few or many, whether they be old and strong or new and weak.**

Yet, He has His own time and order for everything. Therefore, even if a soul is overburdened with sins,

- though it be guilty of all the crimes in the world,
- though it be defiled beyond all imagination,
- if, at the same time, to the extent of its desire and strength, it uses every means and endeavor to become free of sin and turn to the path of good, but cannot get stabilized in anything upright, even the smallest thing, and, on the contrary, sinks ever deeper into evil;

even in the face of all that, it must not weaken in its trust of God or fall away from Him.

That soul must not abandon its spiritual weapons and labors, but must fight and fight, struggling with itself -- and with its enemies -- with all its courage and with untiring effort. For we must know and understand that in this unseen war we are all losers except that person who never ceases to struggle and to keep faith in God. For God never abandons those who fight in His armies -- although at times He allows them to suffer wounds.

So, let us fight, all of us, and do not give ground; for the whole issue is wrapped up in this unceasing struggle. God is always ready with assistance and care for those struck down by the enemies -- and with help for overcoming those enemies -- help which He sends His warriors in due time if they seek Him and firmly hope in Him. At some hour when they least expect it, they will see their proud enemies vanish, as it is written: "The mighty men of Babylon have ceased fighting,... the bars of her gate are broken" (Jeremiah 51:30).

# STUDY QUESTIONS

## LESSON IV

1. What is the difference between the grief felt after committing a sin when we are relying upon ourselves and that felt when our trust is in God alone? How can you relate this truth to your own experience? How does the distinction "feel" to you?
2. Consider the good things set forth in the first paragraph of this chapter which can help us to do God's will -- and the situations in which we may expect them to be helpful. In the light of these, what does the conclusion of the paragraph mean for us in a practical sense? What must we do and keep on doing as long as life and breath shall last?
3. What about the case in which we fail and fail and fail and never seem to be able to do anything we believe is pleasing to God -- what shall we do?
4. What can we say of the relation to God and His people in these situations and in all others? What hope do we have of victory?



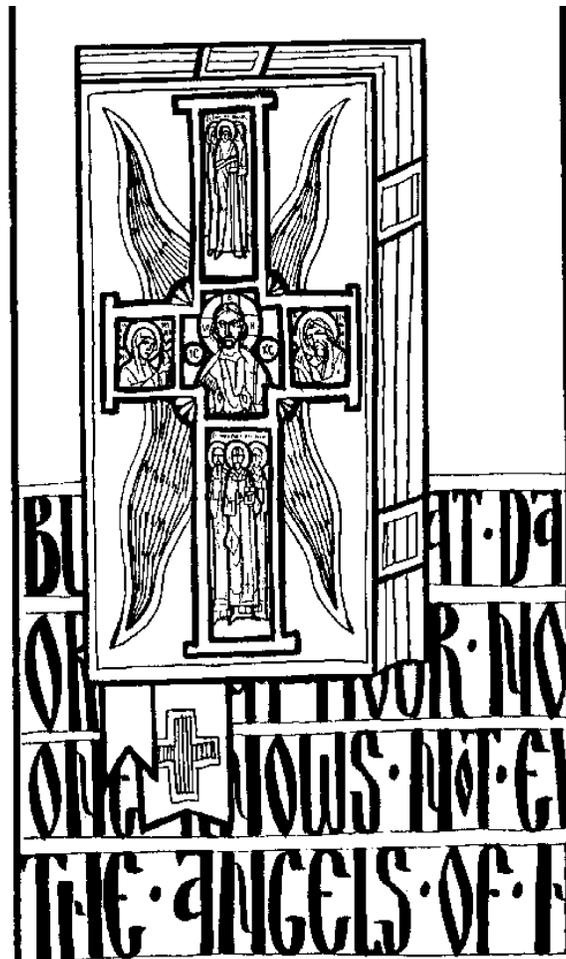
***In The Beginning***  
**Humility & Spiritual Guidance**

LESSON # 5

AVOIDING WORRIES AND A RESTLESS HEART

AND

WHAT TO DO WHEN WOUNDED IN SPIRITUAL WAR





## AS A SOLDIER OF CHRIST: AVOID WORRIES AND A RESTLESS HEART

Just as when we lose our peace of heart, it is our duty to do all we can to restore it, we are no less obligated to prevent the accidental happenings of life from disturbing this peace. By this I mean such happenings as:

- illness,
- wounds,
- deaths of relatives,
- wars,
- fires,
- sudden joys, fears and sorrows,
- memories of former sins and errors,

in a word, all those kinds of things which ordinarily trouble and agitate our heart.

In such cases we simply must not allow ourselves to become worried and agitated. The reason is that once we give in to them, we lose both self-control and the ability to understand events clearly to do the right thing. Each such loss gives the devil another avenue to agitate us still more and push us to take some step that is difficult or even impossible to remedy.

It isn't that we should refuse to let sorrow come -- we cannot stop it. But, do not let sorrow take possession of your heart and agitate it. Keep it outside the bounds of your heart and quickly soften and restrain it so that it cannot prevent you from reasoning soundly and acting correctly. With God's help, this much is within our power -- if we maintain a determined spiritual frame of mind and a firm intent to maintain a proper attitude.

Each hardship we may suffer has its own characteristics and each requires remedies peculiar to it. Nevertheless, there are some things we can say in general -- things having to do with one common aspect: they all do trouble and agitate our soul. And, there is one thing we can always do to help us in any kind of trouble. That is:

**have faith in the good Providence of God, Who arranges the course of our life, with all its accidental happenings, for our good.**

Along with that faith, we must also maintain a serene submission to God's will, expressing that submission in an attitude which causes us to call from the bottom of our heart: "Let God's will be done! For His will is our good."

Different people experience and recognize this good differently:

1. One person recognizes: This goodness of God's leads me to repentance.
2. Another feels: It is because of my sins that the Lord has sent me this trial -- to purify me of them. I am experiencing God's purging.
3. A third thinks: The Lord is testing me to see whether I'm serving Him sincerely.
4. And those who look from the outside at a person experiencing adversity may think a fourth way: This is sent to this person so that the works of God may be revealed in him (or her).

But such a verdict as that last can only be rendered when hardship and affliction is over -- when God's help is evident in the soul of the afflicted person. Only the first three feelings have validity. No matter which of them enters our heart, each has the virtue and strength to quiet the rising storm of sorrow and establish peace and good cheer in our heart.

And, here is a general means for making peace in your heart when some affliction tries to disturb it:

- a. With all your strength make firm your faith in the goodness of God's Providence for you.
- b. Revive in your soul a loyal submission to God's will.
- c. Then introduce into your heart the reflections set forth above and urge it to feel that the hardship you suffer at this moment is either a means by which the Lord is testing you -- or that He is urging you to repent, either in general, or particularly in connection with some wrong action of yours which you had forgotten.

As soon as your heart begins to have even one of these feelings, the pain immediately diminishes and the other two feelings can also come in. All these together will quickly establish such peace and good cheer within that you cannot help crying out: "Blessed be the name of the Lord forever!" The fact is that in a troubled heart these feelings are like oil on the waves of the sea: the waves are stilled and there is a great calm.

Therefore, bring peace to your heart -- to whatever degree it may be troubled. And, be assured: if by extended effort on yourself and by many spiritual labors you implant these feelings in your heart -- so that it is always filled with them -- then, no affliction, distress or hardship will ever trouble you. For this attitude and frame of mind will stop them cold.

Mind: I don't mean that feelings of sorrow will never attack you. They will come, but will retreat at once -- like waves from a strong and rock-hard cliff.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN WE ARE WOUNDED IN SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Suppose you are wounded in your spiritual warfare: that is, you yield to some sin because of weakness or faulty character. I mean here such milder sins as these:

- an inappropriate word has slipped out,
- you lost your temper,
- a bad thought flashed in your head,
- an improper desire has flared up,

and so on.). Still, all is not lost. Remain calm; don't lose heart and fall into irrational confusion and anxiety.

Above all, don't dwell on yourself, saying (or words to this effect):

"How could I do that? How could I allow it? How could I be so stupid?"

This sort of attitude is based on an exalted opinion of yourself. Rather, humble yourself, and raising your eyes to the Lord say and feel:

"What else could be expected of me, O Lord, weak and faulty as I am?"

Then go on to thank Him that the thing has gone no further, saying:

"If it were not for Your unlimited mercy, O Lord, I would not have stopped at that, but would certainly have fallen into something far worse."

But, you must not, along with this awareness and understanding of yourself, allow yourself to fall into the self-indulgent and careless thought that since you are weak, you have a right to behave wrongly -- that it can't be helped. No, no! In spite of the fact that you are weak and imperfect, you are truly guilty for all the wrong things you do. For, since you possess a will, all that comes forth from you is subject to that will. So, in this sense, everything good counts in your favor and everything bad counts against you.

You are not chalking up points for and against yourself with God, of course, but you are revealing the state of your soul -- and doing it good or evil. Therefore, conscious of your many sins and your tendency to fall into them, admit your guilt in the particular sin into which you have just fallen. Judge and condemn yourself and only yourself. Don't look around to see whom you can blame. Neither the people around you nor the circumstances are guilty of your sin. Your own disobedient will alone is to blame. So blame yourself.

Still, be careful. Don't imitate those who say: "O yes, I have done it. So what?" Don't do that or even just casually pass this sin off. Rather, having recognized your fault and reproached yourself, make yourself face the inescapable justice of God. Work quickly to warm up your feelings of repentance -- that is, contrition and remorse -- not because of your own disgrace through sin, but because by your sin you have offended God. For He has shown you so much mercy:

- in calling you to repentance,
- in remitting your past sins,
- in allowing you to participate in the grace of the Mysteries<sup>7</sup>,
- in guiding and protecting your progress on the right path.

The deeper the contrition<sup>8</sup>, the better. However deep it may be, however, do not allow yourself a shadow of doubt about forgiveness. Forgiveness is already fully prepared and the record of all sins has been torn up on the Cross (cf. Colossians 2:14). Repentance and contrition alone are expected of each of us before we can participate in the power of the redemption of the sins of the world through the Crucifixion. Therefore, trusting in this, prostrate yourself in soul and body, crying out to God: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness" (Psalm 51:1). Keep on crying out until you feel yourself both guilty and forgiven -- so that guilt and forgiveness merge into one feeling.

The grace of this feeling finally comes to every repentant person -- that is, to everyone who does as we have said above. But, this must be accompanied by:

a firm decision and commitment not to indulge yourself in the future, but to guard and protect yourself from all downfalls, whether large or small -- and accompanied by a heartfelt prayer for the help of the grace of God in this undertaking.

After such a recent experience of the unreliability of our own powers and efforts, our heart will wish the help of God: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me....Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me with Your generous Spirit" (Psalm 51:10, 12).

All the above:

- self-condemnation,
- contrition,
- expectant prayer for forgiveness,
- the inspiring decision to watch oneself in the future,
- prayer for help and for the gift of grace in this endeavor,

all this, we must practice inwardly every time we commit sin with eyes, ears, tongue, thought or feeling.

We must not, for a single moment, allow sin to remain in our heart unconfessed to the Lord and uncleansed by heartfelt repentance before Him. We may fall again, again and again, but each time do the same. However often you sin, cleanse yourself each time before the Lord. Tell all to your spiritual guide (spiritual father or father confessor) as soon as possible. Such a confession of everything to one's spiritual guide is very important in carrying on our spiritual warfare.

Nothing defeats our enemy's schemes and puts him to flight more effectively than this method of action. That is why the enemy tries by every possible means, both inwardly and outwardly, to prevent it: inwardly by suggestions of thoughts and feelings and outwardly by arranging events, insofar as the Lord allows. Once you begin this work, you will discover what these obstacles are.

Just one thing, however: the enemy tries very hard to suggest that you should not start on the work of your purification right away when you first notice the sin -- no, he will suggest, you should wait just a little while. Just as soon as you agree to this, however, he brings along another sin -- after a sin with the tongue, perhaps one with the eyes, and then another with some other sense. If you listen, then you find yourself, without any particular qualms about it, postponing your purification of this second sin -- since, after all, you must take care of the first one first. So on it goes, with you putting off purification for a whole day, while sin after sin attacks your soul.

By evening (perhaps even bed time) -- or even the end of the week -- when you finally get around to working on purification by repentance, it has become very difficult to clearly see anything in your soul. It is now filled with the noise, commotion, and darkness of the many trespasses which you condoned in an off-hand fashion by neglecting to deal with them.

In such cases our soul becomes like an eye which has been blinded by dust particles, or like water which has become muddied when dirt and filth have fallen into it. Since our soul can no longer see its condition, the work of repentance is abandoned altogether and the soul is left muddied, dirty and clouded. So our prayers become imperfect, we are left unhappy and uncertain, and may even have bad dreams. Thus, a warning: never delay inner purification for even a single moment. As soon as you are aware of something wrong inside, deal with it.

One last thought: A common suggestion by the devil is that you should not tell your spiritual guide (spiritual father or father confessor) what has happened. Don't listen to that suggestion but oppose it by disclosing everything to him. For just as this confession does us good, even more harm results from concealing what takes place in us and with us.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What have you been doing to overcome them when worries begin to get you down?
  
2.
  - a. How can you make use of the ways recommended in this lesson to free yourself from sorrow, restlessness and worries?
  
  - b. Of what value especially to you can be the general recommendations in the last part of the section on avoiding worries?
  
3. How can you begin to make sure that future difficulties will not distract you from your trust in God and your relationship with Him?
  
4.
  - a. What have you been doing when you sin inadvertently?
  
  - b. How does that differ from the recommendations given in this chapter? (Perhaps it does not.)
  
5.
  - a. Which of the recommendations in this chapter seem most applicable to you?
  
  - b. How (if at all) can you make more of them applicable?
  
6. How does "keeping short accounts with God" as recommended in this chapter relate to the maintenance of constant fellowship with Him?

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# ***In The Beginning*** **Humility & Spiritual Guidance**

LESSON # 6

THE DEVIL'S TACTICS  
AND  
PLAN OF BATTLE IN WARFARE:

HOW HE TRIES TO KEEP US IN SLAVERY  
TO SIN





## THE DEVIL'S TACTICS AND PLAN OF BATTLE IN SPIRITUAL WARFARE

We must understand one thing above all about the devil: as far as we are concerned all he cares about is to bring about our ruin. But, he does not use the same tactics of warfare against us all. To help understand this, let us look at:

- some inner conditions we may have,
- the corresponding battle plan of the devil,
- and the means he uses to get around us and lure us into trouble.

A proper state of heart, soul and body is one in which we have been freed from the chains of sin, are attaining to positive virtues, and are determined to remain upon that path. The undesirable inner conditions, in which we may be, fall generally into the following categories (and, alas, we may be at different stages of these in differing areas of our lives -- at the very same time):

- people remaining in the slavery of sin, having no thought of liberation from it;
- people under the slavery of sin who wish to be free but do nothing to do so;
- people who have been freed from the chains of sin, and who have attained virtues, but who once again fall into sin: with still greater moral corruption.
  - Further, in their self-delusion, some such people think that, in spite of it all, they are still advancing toward perfection;
  - others thoughtlessly abandon the path of virtue;
  - still others turn the very virtue they possess into a cause and means of harm for themselves -- just as some, having once been freed from addiction to alcohol, become judgmental and scornful of anyone who drinks the smallest glass of wine.

As we shall see in the next few chapters, the enemy influences each of these categories of people in accordance with their condition and frame of mind. But let us not be impatient: God does not reveal everything to us at once. And, we cannot accurately judge our own inner condition. We need at least a "companion along the way," and, if at all possible, a spiritual father.

## HOW THE DEVIL WORKS TO KEEP PEOPLE IN SLAVERY TO SIN

When the devil has managed to keep someone in slavery to sin, he takes special care to darken that person more and more by spiritual blindness – trying to keep out of his consciousness every good thought that might help him realize the poisoned condition of his life. He seeks to remove thoughts which could lead that person to repentance and the path of virtue. Then, at the same time, he replaces them with sinful and perverted thoughts – presenting along with them opportunities for committing the sin this person is most susceptible to – and enticing him to fall into it or even worse sins as often as possible.

Thus, the poor sinner becomes progressively more blind and darkened. This blindness also strengthens the habit and impulse to go on constantly sinning. Consequently, led progressively from sinful action to greater blindness and from blindness to more and greater sins, the unhappy sinner whirls in this vortex. And he will continue to do so right up to death itself unless he forces himself to respond to the ever-present grace of God.

So, if you find yourself in this dangerous condition and want to be freed from it:

- as soon as a good thought (or even a suggestion of one) comes, calling you from darkness to light and from sin to virtue, immediately accept it wholeheartedly, with full attention and yearning.
- Then, diligently put that good thought into practice, calling from the bottom of your heart to the generous Giver of all blessings: "Help me, O Lord God, help me quickly, and do not let me remain in this sinful darkness." Never grow tired of appealing to God in these or similar words!
- At the same time, also look for help on earth, turning to those who know for advice and guidance on how to better free yourself from the bonds of sinful slavery which now hold you. If it is impossible to do this immediately, do so as soon as you get an opportunity.
- Also at the same time, keep on appealing to the Lord Jesus, crucified for us, asking Him to have mercy on you and never to deprive you of His help.
- Finally, realize that victory and triumph over the enemy can never be obtained by delaying, but only in readiness to rapidly follow an inner (or outer) prompt or reminder to truth, goodness and righteousness.

## HOW HARD IT IS TO ESCAPE WHEN TRAPPED IN THE DEVIL'S NETS

Even after we have realized how dangerous and evil our sinful life is, it is still difficult to escape the devil's trickery. He attempts to keep us in his power, primarily by using a simple but all-powerful suggestion: "Later. Tomorrow. You can change later. You can do good tomorrow."

Deluded by the appearance of good intentions implied by this suggestion, we decide:

"Sure. Tomorrow. Today I will take care of what I have to do. Then tomorrow, free of concern and worries, I will put myself in the hands of God's grace. Then I can follow the path of spiritual life without deviating to the right or to the left. So today I will take care of all these things. Tomorrow I will repent."

That is the trap with which the devil catches many people -- and actually, in one sense, holds the whole world in his hands. But the real reason we are so easily caught in this trap is our own carelessness, laziness and blindness. Only these can explain why, when not only our own salvation, but the glory of God as well, are at stake, we fail to immediately use the easiest, simplest, yet most effective weapon: namely, to say to ourselves, with all determination and energy:

"Right now! At this very moment and no later. I shall repent now instead of tomorrow. Now, this very moment is in my hands. Tomorrow and after are in the hands of God. Even if God grants me tomorrow and after, can I be sure that tomorrow I shall have this same good thought urging me to mend my ways?"

Furthermore, we all know that when we are offered a cure for an illness, it is stupid and foolish to say, "Wait! Let me be sick a little longer!" Anyone who delays the work of salvation does exactly that -- with far more disastrous results.

So, if you want to be free of the delusion and deception of the enemy, if you want to overcome him, take up this trustworthy weapon against him at once. Obey -- in actual deed -- the good thoughts and prompting sent by the Lord, calling you to repent. Do not allow yourself the slightest delay, and don't permit yourself to say:

"I have made a firm resolve to repent -- but a little later -- and I will not abandon that intent." That is one of the worst things you can do -- and certainly the very worst at this time. Resolutions of this sort have always proven deceptive, and many people who relied on them have -- for many reasons -- remained unrepentant to the end of their lives.

Among these are:

- a. Because our own resolutions are not based on distrust of our own abilities and a firm trust in God. Consequently, we maintain a high opinion of ourselves -- and one inescapable result of this is that, failing to accept Divine help, we fall. That is why when we decide within, "Tomorrow I shall, without fail, abandon the path of sin", we always come up with the opposite: that is, instead of rising up, we fall down worse than before, followed by downfall after downfall. God sometimes deliberately allows this to happen in order to bring self-reliant people to the realization of their own weakness -- and to encourage them to seek Divine help, renouncing and abandoning all trust in themselves, since only God's help can be trusted. When can we expect our own decisions will be steadfast and reliable? When we have abandoned all trust in ourself, when all our hopes are based on humility and an unwavering trust in God alone.
- b. When we make such resolutions, what we have in mind is the beauty and radiance of virtue -- which do attract our will, no matter how weak and impotent it may be. In the process the difficult side of virtue escapes our attention. So, today, as we make our resolution, this difficult part escapes our notice -- because the beauty of virtue is so attractive. But tomorrow -- ah, tomorrow -- when our usual work and responsibilities must be faced, this attraction will not be nearly as strong, although we still remember our intention. But as desire for this beauty weakens, our will also becomes weaker, or even relapses into its natural impotence. At the same time, the difficult side of virtue stands out and we see it for what it is -- for the path of virtue, make no mistake, is hard by its very nature, and hardest of all at the first step.

Now, let us suppose that you decided yesterday to enter on this path -- and to actually do so today. Strangely -- but not so strangely -- we no longer find any support from our will to carry out this decision. The desire has lost its intensity, our will has weakened, nothing but obstacles are in sight -- obstacles within ourself, in the habitual pattern of our life, in our usual relationships with others. So what do we decide? "I'll wait a while and gather my strength." So, we go on waiting, from day to day, and it will be no wonder if we wait all our life!

If, on the other hand,

- we had started work yesterday, when the inspiring desire to mend our ways came upon us,
- we had done something in obedience to this desire,
- we had introduced into our life something in this spirit,

today our desire and will would not be so weak as to retreat in the face of obstacles. Understand: there must be obstacles, but if we only had something to lean on within ourself, we would overcome them, even if it were with difficulty. Had we given ourselves over all day to overcoming them, then we would have felt them far less the next day -- and on the third day, still less. Going further and further in that way we become established on the right path.

- c. If we do not translate the good of awakening from the sleep of sin into practice, the awakening will not come so easily again. Even if such awakenings do come, their effect on our will is not so strong as the first time. Our will is no longer as quick to incline toward following them, so even if the resolve to do so is there, it is now weak, lacking energy.

Consequently, if we are able to put off till tomorrow obedience to a stronger impulse -- and then lose that impulse altogether -- it will be so much easier a second time and still more easy the third. And so it goes on: the more often we put off obedience to good impulses, the weaker their effect. After a time they lose their effect altogether, coming and going without a trace, finally ceasing to come at all. We surrender our self to our downfall: our heart hardens and we begin to be actually hostile to good impulses. So delay becomes for us a straight road to final destruction -- to hell itself.

Delays occur not only when we feel an inner impulse to exchange our bad life for a better, but also when we are already leading a good life: For instance, when an opportunity presents itself to do good, and we put it off till tomorrow or till some other indefinite time. All we said about the first form of delay applies to this second kind as well -- and it may indeed lead to the same consequences. If we miss a chance to do good, we not only deprive ourself of the fruit of the good we might have done. We also offend God. Suppose, for instance, God sends us someone in need, and we say, "Go away. Come later." Although we say this to a human being, it is the same as saying it to God, Who sent that person. God will find someone else to help that person, but we who refused will have to answer for it.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### HOW THE DEVIL WORKS TO KEEP PEOPLE IN SLAVERY TO SIN

1. Consider (one at a time) the descriptions of inner spiritual condition given.
  - a. Are you able to assess which fits for you?
  - b. What experiences have you had under any of these?
2. What experiences have you had in the past fighting the devil's tactics to keep you in slavery to sin?
3. Consider the recommendations for getting free of this slavery. How would you suggest implementing them?
4. Have you ever been trapped by the "good-intentions-tomorrow" tactic? How did you escape?
5. Consider the reasons given for failing to deal promptly and thoroughly with our sin.
  - a. Does one of them stand out as an outstanding obstacle to your own spiritual growth?
  - b. How do you fight it?

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# ***In The Beginning*** **Humility & Spiritual Guidance**

LESSON # 7

AVOIDING THE DEVIL'S WILES  
AND  
TURNING OURSELVES OVER TO GOD  
AND HIS WILL

∴CALL OF THE FIRST DISCIPLES∴





## THE DEVIL'S STRATEGIES WHEN WE HAVE STARTED ON THE RIGHT PATH

Suppose, however, that we have:

- overcome the first two obstacles mentioned in the chapter above,
- are filled with desire to be free of the bondage of sin,
- and have begun to work on it.

Even then the enemy will not leave us alone. He does change his tactics, but certainly not his evil desire -- his hope to make us stumble against some stone of temptation and lead us to ruin. The holy fathers describe a person in this position as being under fire from all sides: from above and below, from left and right, from front and rear -- from everywhere arrows come at us:

- Arrows from above are suggestions that we do spiritual work above our present abilities;
- arrows from below are suggestions to reduce or even completely abandon all spiritual labors: through self-pity, carelessness and thoughtlessness;
- arrows come from the right when, in connection with some righteous undertaking, the devil and his allies lead us into temptation and danger of downfall;
- arrows come from the left when those enemies present concrete temptations to draw us toward sin;
- arrows come from the front when the devil and his agents tempt and disturb us by thoughts of what is to come;
- arrows come from the rear when our enemies tempt us with memories of past acts and events.

And, all these tempting thoughts attack our soul either inwardly or outwardly:

- inwardly through images and pictures of fantasy, mentally imprinted in our consciousness -- or through direct evil suggestions planted in our heart, accompanied by impulses of passion generated from our own habits;
- outwardly, through the impressions received by the five external senses in a continuous flow -- as we have pointed out in an earlier chapter.

Besides these, **our enemies have allies in our former sinful habits and our own flesh,**

corrupted as it is by the fall of our race. Having so many means to harm us, the enemy is never discouraged by first failures. He simply and constantly puts into use now one, now another, means of tripping or leading astray the servant of Christ who has avoided the previous attack.

After we have decided to abandon our wrong ways -- and actually do abandon them -- the first undertaking of the enemy is to clear a space for an unhindered field of action against us. He often succeeds in this by suggesting to us, after we have set foot on the right path, to act on our own -- instead of going for advice and guidance to the teachers of righteous life who are always to be found in conjunction with the Church. If we follow their guidance and confirm our actions, both inner and outer, by the good judgment of our spiritual teachers -- usually priests in our parishes, but other qualified spiritual teachers often rise up in the Church as well -- there is no way the enemy can get to us. Whatever he may suggest, the experienced eye of our spiritual teachers will at once see what he is driving at and will warn us. In that way the schemes of the enemy are defeated.

But, if we turn away from our spiritual teachers, the enemy can be counted on to confuse us and lead us astray. And, remember, there are many possible things we can do which do not look evil to us -- though their results often are -- and these are the ones he suggests to us. The inexperienced disciple follows them and falls into an ambush -- and is exposed to great spiritual dangers or is completely destroyed.

The second method used by the enemy is to lead an inexperienced disciple into a position in which he is not only without guidance, but without help. If we decide we can do without advice and guidance in our life, then left to ourself we will soon come up with the idea that outside help is unnecessary for us to be able to live a righteous life and do good. Unfortunately, however, the enemy is at work, speeding up our progress in coming to this notion. He conceals himself, refraining from attacking us during this time, so that, feeling free and unhampered, we begin to imagine that this seemingly good condition is the result of our own efforts. So, we relax, and, continuing to say our prayers about help from above, do so only mechanically -- a meaningless formality. Since we are not really seeking help, none is given, so we, inexperienced and self-trusting disciples, are left to our own devices and powers. Then is when we are easy prey for the enemy.

The results of this self-deception are varied. In some cases people undertake spiritual exercises and works that are both untimely and beyond their powers. At first the strong burst of energy produced by self-reliance gives them the strength to sustain such works -- but this is only for a while. Soon the strength of most people is exhausted and they barely find energy to make the most moderate efforts -- and often abandon them completely.

Some people, however, firing up their self-willed energy more and more, reach such a degree of self-reliance that they end up believing they can do anything. In this state of delirium they take disastrous steps: stop eating altogether, throw themselves from high places, and the like. And remember, all this, unnoticed by the tempted person, is arranged by the enemy.

Another result of self-deception and of ascribing one's successes to oneself is to appropriate the right to give oneself special dispensations and indulgences. There is a form of delusion which, when something new is introduced into life such as repentance, makes days seem like months and weeks like years. Thus, if we have made a few efforts in the new order of life, the enemy hammers into our head the illusion: "I have worked so hard, have fasted so long, spent so many nights without sleep and so on. It's time for a rest." "Rest a while," the enemy suggests, "give the flesh a break. It's time for a little amusement." Then, just as soon as the inexperienced beginner agrees to this, indulgence follows indulgence till the whole order of righteous life is upset. Back we drop into the life we had abandoned, beginning to live carelessly and thoughtlessly, never rolling up our sleeves.

Temptations of this sort:

- to avoid the advice and guidance of others,
- to ascribe successes to oneself,
- to undertake excessive works,
- or to give oneself dispensations,

are used by the devil not just at the beginning of righteous life. He attempts to use these suggestions throughout its whole course. So we see how important it is for us to:

- do everything with advice,
- never to ascribe any successes, however small, to oneself, to our own powers and our own zeal,
- to avoid all excesses and indulgences,
- and to lead a life which, though balanced,
- is energetic and alive,
- always following the order and rule already established:
- by the example of the saints who lived before us,
- and by the good judgment of experienced men and women who are our contemporaries (seek Godly counsel).

## FORGETTING HARDSHIPS AND ABANDONING OURSELVES TO GOD'S WILL

If we are enduring some hardship with a **thankful heart**, we must pay attention! -- lest our enemy succeed in tempting us (or our self-love builds up a desire to be rid of it). For if that happens, we will suffer a double loss:

1. The first is that although the appearance of such a desire (and our consent to it) does not immediately rob us of the **virtue of patience**, it does greatly undermine it. Then when our desire to be free of our hardship or difficulty is not fulfilled, our patience gradually weakens. Eventually, impatience rules.
2. The second is this: from that moment our **patience becomes forced and artificial**, whereas God loves and rewards what is given freely. Therefore, from that moment on, although we must still bear the same hardships and difficulties (for just wanting to be free of them doesn't get rid of them), our **endurance will be unrewarded**. **God will reward us for enduring our afflictions when we endure them with a good spirit and a good attitude**. But from the moment we decide we wish to be free of them, a change takes place: God does not reward unwilling endurance. If, on the other hand, we squelch and reject the desire to be free from troubles and hardships -- just as soon as it rears its ugly head:

-- **throwing ourselves completely on the compassionate will of God,**

-- **declaring our readiness to suffer** even a hundred times greater sorrows if God wishes to send them,

then, even if our present tribulation lasts only an hour (or even less), God will accept it as if it were of the longest possible duration and reward us accordingly.

We must learn to treat all other situations in the same manner, not knuckling under to our desires, but keeping a tight rein on them, directing them to the one primary aim: **to stay within the will of God -- and to do His will**. **If we do that, our desires will turn around, becoming good and righteous**. And, we will stay **calm in every storm**, finding **peace in God's will**. In fact, if we sincerely believe that nothing can happen to us except by His will -- and if we have no other desire than to be actively doing that will -- it is self-evident that we will always get only what we desire!

Of course, when I say nothing can happen to you except by God's will, I mean the hardships, difficulties and loss which God sends to reprove and teach us or to punish us for our sins. But, I do not mean our own or other people's sins themselves: for God does not want anyone to sin. The trials He sends are beneficial to us and are sometimes accurately called "a saving cross" -- which He often imposes on those who love Him most and try to please Him. And, He is especially pleased when we bear them well.

When we wrote above that we should not desire to be free of afflictions, we meant in the sense of submission to God's will. We cannot help wishing to be free of misfortune, for God Himself made the desire for well-being a part of our nature. And, He Himself gave us the request to pray: "Lead us not into temptation" -- a prayer we repeat several times a day! But, if after we pray this prayer (which God is sure to hear), He sends us trouble, it is clearly His specific will -- to which we, as His creatures, conscious of our duty to obey Him in everything, should submit with a good spirit, enduring our trial as something essential to our salvation.

In addition, when we pray, "lead us not into temptation," we must maintain the attitude, "nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39) -- in imitation of our Savior. In other words, we say this prayer not because we abhor temptations so much we want to avoid them at all costs, but because the Lord commanded us to pray it. And His desire is that we keep within our soul a total readiness to accept with a good spirit all God pleases to send us, refusing to pander to the self-loving desire for uninterrupted well-being -- which is impossible on earth anyway, since it belongs to the future eternal life.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### FORGETTING HARDSHIPS AND ABANDONING OURSELVES TO GOD'S WILL

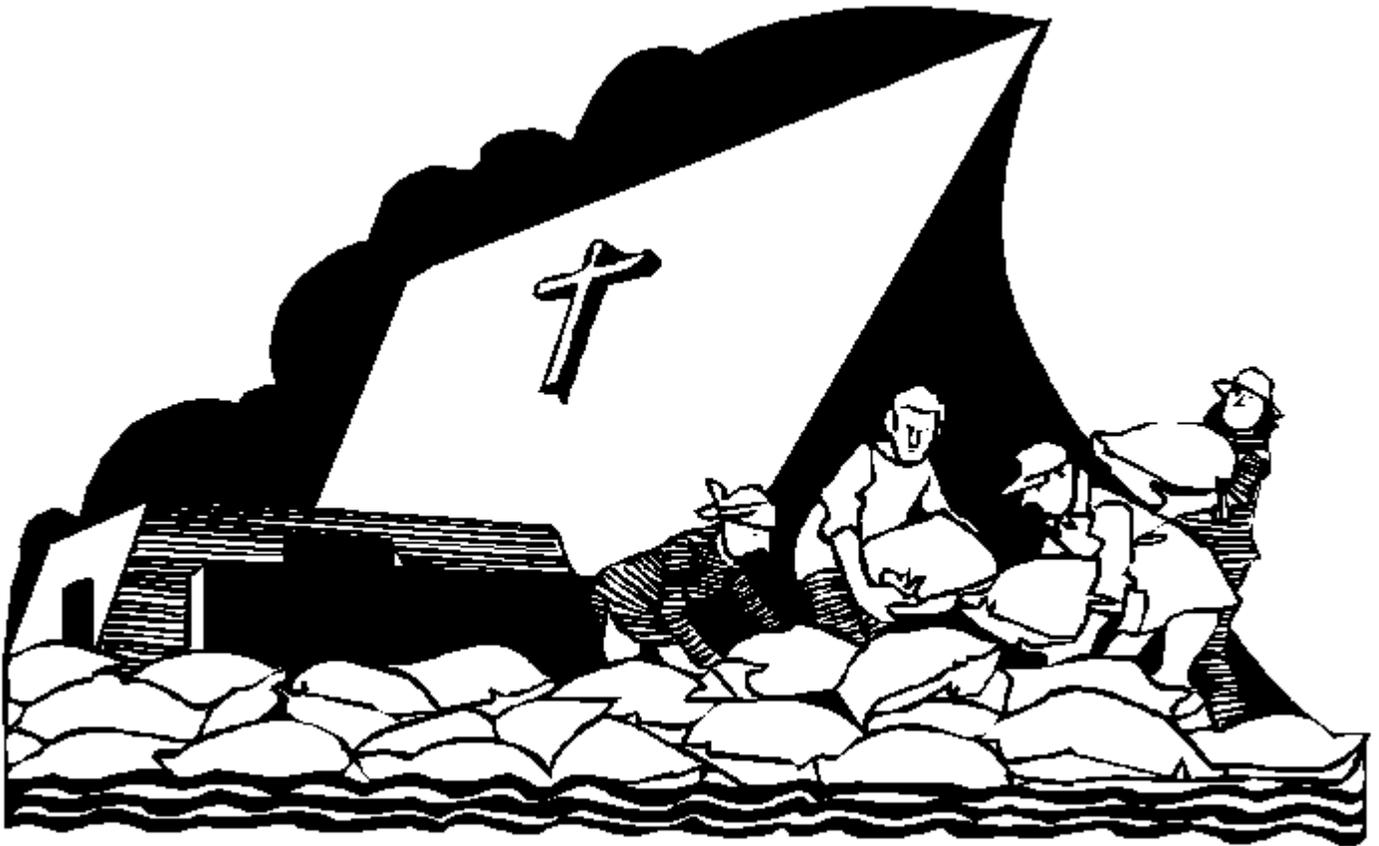
1. Consider the various directions of attack our spiritual fathers tell us to expect from the devil and his angels.
  - a. Which of them have you experienced?
  - b. How have these attacks disrupted (if they have) your efforts in building your inner life?
2. Note the first method used by the enemy to steer us away from the right path. What experience have you had with it?
3. Have you been in a position to be attacked by the second method of deception? What did you do to escape?
4. Which of the results of self-deception have troubled you most?
5. Is the advice given at the end of the chapter practical for you?
6. Consider this: How can we accept hardship as a gift of God and live with it patiently and with a good spirit?
7. What is the central lesson of this chapter? How can you apply it to your life, to the conditions under which you must now live?

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# *In The Beginning* Humility & Spiritual Guidance

LESSON # 8

WATCHING OUT FOR THE DEVIL'S DECEITFUL ADVICE  
AND  
LEARNING NOT TO JUDGE OTHERS





## WATCHING OUT FOR DECEITFUL ADVICE FROM THE DEVIL AND LEARNING NOT TO JUDGE OTHERS

When the devil, deceitful as he is, sees us moving along properly on the path of virtue in spite of his attempts to lead us astray by his obvious temptations to sin, **he changes his tactics. Transforming himself into an angel of light, he suggests, as they suit his purposes:**

- apparently good thoughts,
- texts from the Holy Scriptures,
- examples of the saints,

all in an attempt to persuade us to make extreme, unreasonable and untimely efforts at spiritual perfection. For his aim, we remember, is to cast us down into the abyss at the moment we imagine we stand on the summit. That is why he teaches some people to torment their flesh by excessive fasting and other bodily hardships -- in order:

- to make them fall into pride, imagining they are achieving great things;
- or, to make them fall ill from extreme exhaustion and become incapable of performing even the smallest righteous deeds;
- or, to make them so tired of the burden of their efforts that they become indifferent to all spiritual endeavor, and even to salvation itself -- and then, with their enthusiasm for good growing gradually cooler, throw themselves into the lusts of the flesh and worldly comforts with more gusto than before.

We can never know how many souls have fallen into this snare of the devil -- carried away by the intensity of their foolish zeal and in their excessive discipline of their bodies going beyond what they are able to bear, suffering in self-torment of their own invention and becoming the laughing stock of evil demons! Note that this would never have happened if they had followed good judgment and advice (and had not forgotten that bodily discipline, though admirable and fruitful where there is sufficient strength of the body and humility of the soul, must always be controlled by good sense and used only as a means to spiritual progress). The discipline of the body must never become an aim in itself, and indeed ascetic practices must sometimes be reduced, sometimes increased, sometimes changed, and sometimes stopped altogether for a time.

Those who cannot be as strict with themselves as some of the saints -- nor carry out as strong ascetic practices -- can imitate their lives in other ways, for they can:

- arouse and establish good dispositions in their hearts,
- acquire the habit of fervent prayer,
- wage unrelenting war against thoughts and desires inspired by the passions,
- protect the purity of their hearts,
- love silence and solitude,
- be humble and meek with all people,
- do good to those who have caused them suffering,
- and guard themselves against all evil, however insignificant.

All these righteous activities of heart are more pleasing to God than excessive accomplishments of subduing, controlling and putting down the flesh -- especially when the latter are not required by our moral condition.

We must use good judgment in undertaking tasks of physical asceticism when they are needed for our spiritual gain:

1. First, avoid launching out with lofty standards, but should rather begin at the bottom. It is better to climb up gradually than to suddenly undertake something lofty and be forced to climb down to a more realistic level (to our shame).
2. At the same time, also avoid the other extreme, into which even people who are considered very spiritual sometimes fall. Under the influence of self-pity and self-indulgence, they exhibit a too great concern for the preservation of their physical health -- taking such great care of themselves that they tremble at the slightest physical effort, afraid to impair their health. They cannot think or talk about anything else than preserving their life. At the same time, by inventing delicate dishes which cater more to their refined tastes than does healthy food, they actually weaken and even impair their health. And this is not even to mention that they are, in the process, depriving themselves of the very blessings they prize so highly because they are unable or unwilling to do what is necessary to attain them.

Although these people justify their very dissimilar actions by the desire to work for the Lord, they are actually attempting to reconcile two irreconcilable enemies: flesh and spirit. And these efforts not only fail to benefit either flesh or spirit but actually work obvious harm to both alike. For they deprive the body of health and the spirit of its own healthy condition.

We simply must recognize that a moderate and orderly way of life, controlled by reason, taking account of the needs of the soul and the particular condition of the body, is much less dangerous and certainly more useful for both the soul and the body. In this respect the standard is not the same for everyone -- though one rule applies to all of us: to keep the body submissive to the spirit.

Finally, we must also remember something said earlier: the acquisition of virtues, whether of the body or of the soul, should be gradual, climbing up little by little.

## HOW TO OVERCOME OUR TENDENCY TO JUDGE OTHERS

Our self-love and high opinion of ourselves give birth within us to yet another sin which damages us greatly. That sin is severe judgment and condemnation of ours -- demonstrated when we:

- consider them of little or no value,
- despise them,
- and when opportunity arises, humiliate them.

This sinful habit, being born of pride, feeds and grows on pride -- in turn feeding pride and making it grow. Every time we pass judgment, our pride grows a bit more because of the accompanying feelings of self-importance and self-gratification.

Since we value (and think of) ourselves so highly, we naturally look at others as if from on high (as if from a judgment seat), judging and despising them. For we seem to ourselves exempt from those faults we think others possess. Right there our enemy, the devil, who constantly looks for an opportunity to damage us, finds an opening:

- a. Seeing our sinful state of spirit and heart, he suggests we keep a sharp watch on what others say and do.
- b. And he leads us to draw conclusions from these observations -- conclusions concerning what they think and feel.
- c. Then, on the basis of these suppositions, we form an opinion of them -- generally

not good -- exaggerating this supposed defect so that we conclude that the person we are judging has a deeply rooted character defect.

Alas! When we so judge others, we neither see nor realize that the very origin of our judgment -- the suspicion of wrong on the part of others -- is actually planted in our mind by the action of our enemy. Nor do we even suspect that he is behind our thoughts, fanning this suspicion into a certainty that the people we judge are like what we imagine -- even though they are not.

Therefore we must keep a sharp lookout: The enemy watches us constantly, waiting for an opportunity to sow evil in us. So we must keep an ever-increasing watch over ourselves, lest we fall into the trap he sets for us. Just as soon as he shows us some fault in our neighbor, we must quickly reject the thought -- lest it take root in us and grow. Take warning: we must cast it out so that no trace is left in us, and replace it with thoughts of the good qualities we know our neighbor possesses (or of those qualities people generally should possess).

Then, if we still feel the impulse to pass judgment, let us add to these thoughts a certain truth: **That we are given no authority to pass judgment and the moment we assume this authority we make ourselves worthy of judgment and condemnation -- not before powerless people, but before God, the all-powerful Judge of all!**

This reversal of attitudes is one of the best and strongest means of not only rejecting stray critical thoughts that pop into our minds, but also for (with constant attention and much work) freeing ourselves from this sin.

The second method, equally as strong (and as difficult!), is to never let ourselves forget our own wickedness, our polluted and sinful passions and behavior -- and correspondingly to hold on to the constant realization of our own unworthiness. And, we will certainly find in ourselves many such passions -- as well as the behavior that they inspire!

If we have not finally given up and shrugged our shoulders, saying, "Whatever will be will be," we cannot help wanting to find a cure for these diseases, which are truly killing us more surely than any physical ailment. And we can be sure of this: if we sincerely devote ourselves to this work, we will have no time to concern ourselves with the affairs of others and pass sentence on them. For, once we go at it, there will ring in our ears sayings such as: "Physician, heal yourself!" (Luke 4:23), and "First remove the plank from your own eye" (Matthew 7:5).

Furthermore, when we severely judge some wrong behavior on the part of our neighbor, we must realize that there is (at least) a small root of the same sin lying within our own heart -- which, through its relation to our passions, tells us to make assumptions about others and to judge them. We know that, "an evil man out of the evil treasure (of his heart) brings forth evil things" (Matthew 12:35).

But an eye that is pure and not under the influence of sinful passions also looks without passion on the behavior of others -- and not with evil.

We recall the words of Scripture, "You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness" (Habakkuk 1:13). When, therefore, the thought enters our mind to condemn someone for some fault, we must turn it around and be indignant with ourself as committing the same actions -- being guilty of the same fault. Then, in our hearts let us say: "How can I, unworthy as I am, lift up my head to look at the faults of others and condemn them, when I am immersed in the same sin and my own trespasses are even greater." By doing this we turn against ourselves that weapon which our evil thought urges us to use against someone else -- and instead of wounding our brother or sister, we will at least give first aid to our own wounds.

If the sin of your neighbor is not hidden but obvious to everyone, try to see its cause -- not in the way the wicked passion for judging suggests -- but as a Christian brother or sister should see it. Say to yourself:

"Since this neighbor of mine has many hidden virtues, God has allowed him (or her) to fall into this present sin in order to protect him (her) from being damaged by conceit and pride. Or He has allowed this person to take on this very unbecoming appearance so that he (she) will appear unworthy in his (her) own eyes -- and being despised by others for being in this condition, he (she) will gather the fruits of humility and become even more pleasing to God."

In this way we will believe that the present instance of sin will do our neighbor more good than harm.

And even if a person's sin is not only obvious but very serious and comes from a hardened and unrepentant heart, let us not condemn him. Rather, we must lift up our eyes to the wonderful and incomprehensible judgments of God. Then we will see that many people who were once filled with iniquity have later repented and reached a high degree of holiness. Others, on the other hand, who were once on a high level of perfection, fell into a deep chasm. Let us take care lest we also suffer such a calamity through judging others.

Therefore, we must always be on guard in fear and trembling -- fearing more for ourselves than for others. Further, we may be assured that every good word we utter on behalf of our neighbor -- and every rejoicing for his sake -- is the action and fruit of the Holy Spirit within us. On the other hand, every bad word and scornful condemnation comes from our own sinful tendencies and the suggestions of the devil. Therefore, when we are tempted by some wrong behavior on the part of our neighbor, let us not sleep until we have driven this temptation from our heart -- and completely made peace with our brother or sister.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

WATCHING OUT FOR DECEITFUL ADVICE FROM THE DEVIL  
AND  
LEARNING NOT TO JUDGE OTHERS

1. What do you consider to be the greatest danger to you (that is, you, in particular) in the matters discussed in this chapter?
  
2. How can we avoid going beyond our ability in our zeal for spiritual progress? What have you done to help guide yourself in this aspect of spiritual warfare?
  
3. What adverse outcomes have you seen from people judging others severely?
  
4. Have you ever found yourself making severe judgments of other people? If so, how did you overcome it?
  
5. How can the suggestions given in this chapter be adapted by you to help you avoid severe judgments of other people?

# *In The Beginning* Humility & Spiritual Guidance

## LESSON # 9

### SURRENDERING TO THE WILL OF GOD





## ON SURRENDERING OURSELVES TO THE WILL OF GOD

When someone has repented, he gives himself up to the service of God and immediately begins this service by obeying His commandments and His will. The fact is that this work (this labor) begins with the sweat of the brow. Commandments are not hard in themselves, but there are many obstacles to practicing them when we begin to apply them to our own external circumstances -- and especially to our inner tendencies and habits. But with God's help a tireless fighter overcomes everything in the end, achieving peace within and a calm flow of events on the outside (relatively, of course).

The one who struggles always acts -- but with the help of God. The experience of his first days of struggle makes him realize that in spite of all his efforts, if anything good is accomplished, it is done only because he is given power from on high to do it. The further he goes, the more this conviction grows and the more deeply rooted it becomes. When comparative peace within is established, this conviction is emphasized and takes command, finally resulting in complete submission to God's will or in total surrender to His influence.

In those who struggle for salvation, God's influence begins to act from the very first moments of their turning to Him -- and, in fact, brings about the turning itself. But it begins to grow as the struggler turns further and further away from himself, attaching himself to God, and realizing his own inability, builds a growing trust in God's power. When he finally surrenders himself entirely to God, God is actively present in him -- both in showing what he must do and in fulfilling it.

This is the ultimate, the summit, if you will, of Christian perfection, in which "it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). As we noted at the start, the seed of this perfection lies in learning not to rely on ourselves, but to hope in God -- and here it is shown in full maturity.

What makes up the essence of total submission to the will of God can be seen when it is demonstrated to the fullest extent. There are no special rules for acquiring it, for it comes as we give ourselves over to Him -- so it is impossible to say, "Do this and you will receive it." Total surrender to God grows imperceptibly as we turn from relying on ourselves to hope in God.

We reach that state of total submission as we die to ourselves (usually gradually) -- that is, to our own opinions, wishes and feelings or tastes, in order to live by Divine guidance. This we obtain by conforming ourselves with God's will and partaking of Him (cf. 2 Peter 1:4). In the forefront of all this endeavor is our Lord and Savior. He surrendered the whole of Himself to God the Father -- and us in Himself, for as the Apostle Paul writes: "We are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones" (Ephesians 5:30).

Let us, therefore, follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus, Who prayed to God the Father for us: "And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth" (John 17:19) -- in the hope that we shall indeed be sanctified, and behave as those who are. Total surrender of the will to God is actually the sacrificing of oneself as a burnt offering (so to speak) to God.

Why is this sacrifice of ourselves made at the end instead of the beginning? Because an offering to God must be perfect, without blemish. In the beginning we seek perfection, but we have not yet attained it. When in the end it is finally attained, then it is fitting to offer ourselves as a sacrifice. At first one only dedicates himself to this sacrifice, but at the end he actually makes the sacrifice of himself.

And it is impossible to sacrifice oneself as a burnt offering before attaining perfection. Other sacrifices can be offered, such as thanksgiving offerings and offerings of purification, but not the burnt offering. We can attempt it and we can talk about it, but it will simply be words and not the actual deed -- which is ultimately accomplished without words.

We must understand that:

- as long as we are still attached to something earthly,
- just as long as we lean on something within or without that is not God,
- just as long as we find our enjoyment in something created,

we are unfit to be a burnt offering. We must come to the point of endeavoring to renounce all this, making all the lives inside us stop, with only one life remaining -- life in God. In other words, we must come to the point at which we no longer live, but instead God the Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit live in us (cf. Galatians 2:20).

When you have reached that point, sacrifice yourself to God -- or rather, you will be sacrificed to God. And until this time comes, have as an offering to God a contrite spirit, and a contrite and humble heart. Be content with this for a time, but not forever. For in the end you must come to the point of sacrificing yourself completely as a burnt offering to God.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### ON SURRENDERING OURSELVES TO THE WILL OF GOD

1. What experience of surrendering yourself to the will of God have you had in the past?
2. What do you see as the most important element in the surrender of ourselves to God?
3. How, following the advice of this chapter, would you, in turn, advise someone to go about that surrender?



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***In The Beginning***  
**Humility & Spiritual Guidance**

LESSON # 10

ON WARMTH, COOLNESS AND DRYNESS OF HEART





## ON WARMTH OF HEART AND ON COOLING AND DRYNESS OF HEART

Spiritual warmth of heart is the fruit of yearning for God and everything pertaining to Him. This warmth is actually born when we turn to God in repentance. In the course of our efforts to purify our heart, the warmth gains more and more strength, so that we rise from intermittent feelings of warmth in our heart to a gradually constant warming, till finally it becomes, by God's grace, a permanent state of our heart.

In one place in his writings St. John of the Ladder advised: "Strive always to have feelings toward God and divine things." He meant, strive to have this warmth. Every object which delights the heart warms it, so warmth of heart can be of many kinds. Spiritual warmth is born through the influence of spiritual things upon the heart -- built up through the progress of our spiritual life. Its distinctive feature is renunciation of all created things -- when the attention is totally captivated by God and everything godly and heavenly. This feature makes it as far removed from warm feelings of soul and body as heaven is removed from earth.

The feeling of spiritual warmth is concentrated and seems uncomplicated and specific. In its essence, however, it is a fusion of many spiritual operations -- just as a ray of light is the fusion of all the colors of the spectrum. It contains (at least):

- reverence,
- contrition,
- tenderness,
- prostrating oneself before God,
- worship,
- holy zeal,
- and love of God.

Since these spiritual feelings cannot all become established in our heart at once, spiritual warmth does not instantly become an attribute of our heart.

Until spiritual warmth of heart has become a permanent condition, it comes and goes. Either it comes on its own, as a heavenly guest, or it is a fruit of spiritual exercises -- such as reading, meditation, prayer, acts of self-denial, and good works. It leaves when attention strays from spiritual subjects -- following which the heart partakes of things which are not of the spirit and delights in them. This quenches spiritual warmth, just as water quenches fire.

But suppose we want to preserve this spiritual warmth in our heart. What do we do? Just this:

- Maintain your attention within and stand praying in your heart before God.
- Do not allow your thoughts to wander, distracting your attention.
- Let no sympathy for things of either the soul or the body enter your heart.
- Cut off at once all cares and worries at their onset.
- Keep alive your zeal to please God and to save your soul.
- In all external affairs, follow the order dictated by reason, directing them all toward your chief aim, and while doing one thing, don't burden your thoughts by cares about the many.

At the same time we must add that once we have experienced this spiritual warmth, we cannot help endeavoring to keep it. In doing so, we must use proper means -- if we do, we will discover the best way to keep it. If we carry this out with good judgment, spiritual warmth will become our trustworthy guide, teaching us:

- how to control our inner life,
- how to behave in external affairs,
- and how to control our conduct in order to keep this very thing.

Just as the presence of spiritual warmth in the heart is sweet, its absence is correspondingly bitter, wearisome and frightening. We have already noted that it goes away when the attention and the heart stray from the things of the spirit, turning toward things not of the spirit. And we do not mean by this something sinful -- since a person who has had a taste of spiritual warmth is no longer attracted by sin. No, we simply mean anything of the soul-body realm -- pointless, earthly, created. As soon as attention inclines toward such things, spiritual warmth immediately declines. And when the heart also turns that way and adheres to any such thing, spiritual warmth withdraws entirely -- leaving behind coldness toward all things godly and toward God Himself, accompanied by indifference to all spiritual works and activities practiced for the purpose of preserving this warmth.

If a person in such circumstances remembers right away what he is about and hastens to re-establish his customary warmth-producing pattern of life, this warmth returns -- sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. But if he pays no attention to it and, through becoming:

- scattered,

- infatuated with something,
- or self-reliant,

deliberately allows himself to linger in this cooling atmosphere (and especially if he takes the risk of satisfying in actual behavior his non-spiritual tastes which have been resurrected by it), his very zeal for spiritual life is undermined -- if not completely deadened. This latter condition is the forerunner of falling into his once-habitual sins -- which will surely overcome a careless person. But, if such a person remembers what he is about and where he is headed, he can return without too much difficulty, even from there, to his spiritual condition.

The above process is how spiritual cooling always happens. It comes about through our own fault, since it is caused by a decrease in attention and watchfulness over ourselves. This diminution of our attention comes about either as a response to the temptations existing in our surroundings -- when various kinds of worldly delusion blunt and captivate us -- or by the wiles of the enemy, who manages to persuade us to come out of our inner self. The enemy sometimes manages to do this merely by inserting his own more attractive pictures in the natural flow of images of fantasy -- and sometimes by affecting the body in some way. But: **whatever the cause, cooling begins with our attention straying from our inner depths.** It makes further progress when our heart attaches itself to something pointless and empty at first, but is later excited by the passions<sup>9</sup> and sinful. In every case it is our own fault. For, and we must always remember this: **neither the world nor the devil can violate our freedom -- they can only subject us to temptation.**

- Sometimes cooling comes about through the action of grace. Examined from the correct perspective, spiritual warmth must be seen as the fruit of grace present in the heart. When grace comes, the heart is warm. When grace goes, the heart is cold.
- Grace also leaves us when we deviate from our inner attention because we are attracted by wrong things. Then the cooling can be called punitive.
- Sometimes, however, grace is withdrawn for the purpose of assisting the spiritual progress of the servants of God. When that happens, the cooling can be called instructive. The consequences, however, are still the same: cooling and a sensation of emptiness in the heart, for the guest and visitor has gone.

The difference between these coolings is that the guilty cooling weakens even our desire for spiritual life. Cooling due to an instructive withdrawal of grace, however, makes that desire burn with even greater fervor -- which is one of the purposes of such withdrawal.

Divine grace is withdrawn for instructional purposes for several reasons:

1. To stimulate zeal, which sometimes slackens during a long period of calm.
2. To make us examine our situation with greater attention and reject those attachments and activities not directly connected with a life acceptable to God and not leading to Him.
3. To increase and strengthen the consciousness and feeling that everything good in us is the fruit of God's grace.
4. To make us rate the gifts of God more highly in the future -- care more about preserving them, and be more deeply humble.
5. To make us surrender ourselves with greater sincerity to the hands of Divine providence -- with complete self-denial and self-minimization.
6. To force us not to become attached to spiritual delights themselves -- thus dividing our heart -- for God wishes the whole of it to belong to Him alone.
7. To prevent us from relaxing our efforts when Divine grace works in us, but to make us work without sleeping on the path of God -- exerting all the powers He has given us especially for this purpose.

Consequently, we see that even when spiritual cooling results from an instructive withdrawal of Divine grace, we ourselves are the cause of it. For although Divine grace withdraws of its own accord, it does so with an eye on us. So when you feel a cooling of your desire for spiritual things and activities -- and for all things holy and sacred in general -- enter deeply within yourself and carefully examine what has happened. If it is your fault, go to work quickly to eliminate that fault and destroy it -- not so much because you are anxious for the return of spiritual blessings, but rather because you want to destroy in yourself everything inappropriate and not pleasing to God.

If, on the other hand, we examine ourselves and find nothing unsuitable or displeasing to God, the proper thing to do is simply submit to God's will, saying to ourself:

"God has decided this is the way it is to be for now. Let Your will be done in me, O Lord, weak and unworthy as I am."

Then we must be patient and wait, never allowing ourselves to depart from the customary order of our spiritual life, spiritual works and exercises. Along with this let us overcome any lack of taste for these efforts which may have attacked us -- by forcing ourselves to practice them, paying no attention to thoughts which try to distract us from our efforts by suggesting that all this is useless. And, let us willingly drink our cup of bitterness, saying to the Lord:

"See my humility and my efforts, O Lord, and do not deprive me of Your mercy."

Then, let our efforts be stimulated by the faith that this cup comes from God's love for us -- for He desires us to attain to greater spiritual perfection.

We must, then, follow in the footsteps of the Lord -- not only to Mount Tabor (where He was transfigured), but also to Golgotha (where He was crucified). In other words, we must simply follow Him: not only when we feel divine light and spiritual joys and blessings within, but also when we are attacked by darkness, tribulations, stress and bitterness which our soul has to experience at times from the temptations of the demons -- within and without.

Even if this cooling is accompanied by such darkness and confusion that we do not know what to do or where to turn, we are to have no fear. Instead, let us stand firm, remain submissively on our cross, and cast far away from us every earthly comfort -- which the world and the flesh choose to offer, prompted by the enemy. Further, we must also try to hide our sickness from all other people, speaking of it to no one but our spiritual father. Nor is it proper for us to complain about the spiritual tribulations we are undergoing, but rather to seek guidance on how to avoid it in the future and how to suffer it with a good heart and attitude now -- for as long as God pleases to keep us in it.

In the meantime, let us continue to practice our prayers, communion, and other spiritual exercises just as usual:

- not for the sake of spiritual blessings,
- not in order to be taken down from our present cross,
- but to be given strength to remain nailed to that cross with our soul undisturbed, to the glory of Christ our Lord, crucified for us,
- and to always live and behave in a way pleasing to Him.

If our condition sometimes makes it impossible for us to pray and to have good thoughts as before -- because of great darkness and confusion in our spirit -- we must simply do the best we can, as long as we do so without laziness and self-indulgence. Then the lack of perfection in execution will be accepted as perfect for the sake of our desire, effort and seeking. If we continue with that desire, effort and seeking, we will see its wonderful fruits -- inspiration and strength filling our soul.

We can find in the Scriptures excellent examples of how to call to God in such times of darkening our spirit. We can call out:

"Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God" (Psalm 43:5).

And,

"Why do You stand afar off, O LORD? Why do You hide Yourself in times of (my) trouble?" (Psalm 10:1).

And further:

"Do not forsake me, O LORD; O my God, be not far from me!" (Psalm 38:21).

Remembering how Sarah, the beloved wife of Tobias, was inspired by God to pray in her trouble (Tobit 3:11ff), cry out:

"Everyone who works for You, O Lord, truly knows that if this life is a trial, it will be crowned, and if it is filled with afflictions, it will be redeemed and, by Your mercy, will not cease even in corruption. You do not rejoice in our destruction, but bring calm after storm and joy after tears and weeping. Blessed be Your name forever, O God of Israel!"

It is also proper to bring to our recollection Christ our Lord Who, through His immeasurable sufferings felt Himself abandoned by His heavenly Father in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. And when we feel as if we are crucified in our present position, let us cry out from our heart, "Your will be done, O Lord!" and "Not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).

If we do this, our patience and our prayer will rise on high to God's presence, as the flame of the sacrifice of our heart. And, we will prove ourself filled with love as strong as death, as well as fervent readiness of will to shoulder our cross and follow Christ our Lord on any path by which He chooses to call us to Himself. This is true life in God: **to desire and seek God for His own sake and to possess Him and partake of Him in the way and to the extent He wishes.**

If we entered the path of godly life with this attitude and measured our progress by its strength (instead of by the shifting tides of spiritual joys and blessings),

- we would not be so easily overcome by temptations which come of themselves or through the wiles of the enemy,
- nor would we uselessly grieve or complain when times of cooling and dryness come.
- On the contrary, we would accept such times thankfully and endure them gladly, convinced that if it is God's will, it must be for our own good. Disregarding them, we would continue along the path of a life pleasing to God, observing all the commandments with still greater zeal, greater self-denial, and greater pushing of ourselves along.

It sometimes happens that while the soul goes along despairing in this state of coolness of spiritual fervor and absence of taste for anything spiritual, the enemy attacks with greater force, provoking evil thoughts, shameful impulses, and seductive dreams. His aim is to provoke hopelessness from the sense of being abandoned by God and to make us give up the struggle. He aims to bend us toward some act of the passions so he can easily lead us back into the whirlpool of sinful life.

Being aware of this, we must stand firm. So what if waves of sin roar around our heart? -- just so long as our heart is filled with hostility to sin and with desire to be faithful to God, our little boat is safe. Divine grace has withdrawn its comforts from us, but it stands nearby, watching. It will not leave us without help as long as our will is on the side of good. Thus, we must stand firm, motivated by the certainty that this storm will soon be over and with it our spiritual dryness will leave. We must also believe this is allowed for our own good. For, if we endure this time of trial and temptation, we will come out of it with greater knowledge of our own weakness, greater humility, and a stronger conviction that God's help is always ready at hand.

In previous chapters we have written of such tempestuous attacks by the enemy. It will do us all good to read about them once more!

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### ON WARMTH OF HEART AND COOLING AND DRYNESS OF HEART

1. How would you define spiritual warmth of heart?
2. How should we go about building spiritual warmth of heart?
3. What can we do to help preserve spiritual warmth of heart once we have experienced it?
4. What would you say to someone who says, "I just cannot sustain any spiritual warmth"?

#### **PLEASE READ AND CONTEMPLATE**

The endnote pages which follow contain valuable information.

It is important and necessary to read and study them.

It will be truly helpful in your efforts and studies.

**WE MUST ALL LEARN TO CONTROL THE FORCES OF EVIL**

*AND*

**WITH GOD'S HELP AND OUR EFFORTS WE CAN**

## ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this Guide we will refer to our "enemies." We mean these in particular: the world, the flesh and the devil. Also included in this term, however, are all the demons of hell, the minions of the devil, those angels who fell with him and desire our own downfall as well.
2. "spirit" -- the better and more complete word is **nous**. It is a Greek word used over and over again by the spiritual fathers, to refer to the **highest faculty of the soul - to know and hear God**. Too often it is translated "mind" but the fact is we think of "mind" as our rational, thinking faculty – the logos. Moreover, in the Philokalia it is far too often poorly translated as "intellect". This is particularly true in the edition published in 1979 by Faber and Faber. For our purposes the word nous is to be understood and distinct from both the intellect (logos) of the soul and the "spirit" of the soul. Therefore, the word "spirit" as used in the Faber edition of the Philokalia is better translated as "nous" with the following meaning and understanding:

"the highest faculty in man, through which -- provided it is purified -- he knows God or the inner essences or principles of created things by means of direct apprehension or spiritual perception. Unlike the dianoia or reason ["logos" which is truly the conceptualizing and logical faculty -- the function of which is to draw conclusions or formulate concepts deriving from knowledge.], from which it must be carefully distinguished, the "nous" does not function by formulating abstract concepts and then arguing on this basis to a conclusion reached through deductive reasoning, but it understands divine truth by means of immediate experience, intuition or 'simple cognition' (the term used by St. Isaac the Syrian). The "nous" dwells in the 'depths of the soul'; it constitutes the innermost aspect of the heart (St. Diadochos). The "nous" is the organ of contemplation, the 'eye of the heart.'" (The Philokalia, Volume I, translated and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kalistos Ware, published by Faber and Faber, 1979, page 362 with our substitution of "nous" for their word "spirit". It is better to understand spirit as the energy of the soul which reveals and communicates, the perfected brightness ( or lack therein ) of God's presence made manifest in our inner hearts, proceeding through the eyes of the heart, generated from the "nous" of the soul.

3.

### **PASSIONS**

Since we will repeatedly encounter the use of the word **PASSIONS**, we need to right away get some sense of what is meant when it occurs.

- I. The Oxford English Dictionary defines **PASSION** as "any kind of feeling in which the mind is powerfully affected or moved: Commanding, vehement, or overpowering emotion: e.g., ambition, avarice, desire, hope, fear, love, hatred, joy, grief, anger, revenge....Writers who treat of passions commonly divide them into desire and aversion, hope and fear, joy and grief, love and hatred."
- II. Definitions:
  - A. In the "Glossary" of Volume I of The Philokalia, our primary source of the writings of the spiritual fathers of the Church, we find this definition of **PASSION**: "in Greek the word signifies that which happens to a person or thing, an experience undergone passively; hence, an appetite or impulse such as anger, desire or jealousy, that violently dominates the soul. Many Greek Fathers regard the passions as something intrinsically evil, a "disease" of the soul: thus, St. John Climacus affirms that God is not the creator of the passions and that they are "unnatural," alien to man's true self (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 26). Other Greek Fathers, however, look on the passions as impulses originally placed in man by God, and so fundamentally good, although at present distorted by sin (cf. St. Isaiah the Solitary, Vol. 1, page 22 of this translation). On this second view, the passions are to be educated, not eradicated; to be transfigured, not suppressed; to be used positively, not negatively." (Philokalia, Volume I, pp 363-364).
  - B. In the same Glossary, **DISPASSION** is also defined -- and in a manner that is relevant:

"Among the writers of the texts here translated, some regard passion as evil and the consequence of sin, and for them dispassion signifies passionlessness, the uprooting of the passions; others, such as St. Isaiah the Solitary, regard the passions as fundamentally good, and for them dispassion signifies a state in which the passions are exercised in accordance with their original purity and so without committing sin in act or thought.

Dispassion is a state of reintegration and spiritual freedom; when translating the term into Latin, John Cassian rendered it "purity of heart." Such a state may imply impartiality and detachment, but not indifference, for if a dispassionate man does not suffer on his own account, he suffers for his fellow creatures. It consists, not in ceasing to feel the attacks of the demons, but in no longer yielding to them. It is positive, not negative: Evagrius links it closely with the quality of love and Diadochus speaks of the "fire of dispassion" (Vol. I, page 258). Dispassion is among the gifts of God." (The Philokalia, Vol. I, page 381).

III. More needs to be added to this statement, however.

A. One thing is a sort of "definition of passion" taken from St. Maximus the Confessor:

"Every passion always consists of a combination of:

a) some perceived object

b) a sense faculty [sight, hearing, taste, touch smell]

c) and a natural power [of the soul] -- the incensive (emotional) power [i.e., anger], desire, or the intelligence, as the case may be -- whose natural function has been distorted."

B. Elsewhere St. Maximus refers to the passions as naturally good:

"If the natural passions of the body are governed by the intelligence there is no reason to censure them. But when their activity is not controlled by the intelligence, they do deserve censure. This is why it is said that such passions must be rejected, for although their activity is natural, they may often be used, when not governed by the intelligence, in a way that is contrary to nature." (The Philokalia, Volume II, page 214).

**Consequently, we must use great care in speaking of THE PASSIONS. We will not consider them as unequivocally evil, but will be very concerned about their misuse. When we speak of sinful or of ungodly and unwholesome or of misdirected passions we will mean:**

All sorts of illicit desires and passions including hate, improper anger, the lure of illicit sex and the fantasies which accompany it, worry, envy, covetousness, jealousy, self-indulgence -- and many other inappropriate and wrong ardent desires and feelings.

Sometimes, however, particularly in later chapters, we will use only the word "passions" when we mean to refer to these "sinful passions."

4. We are writing here of the necessity not to rely on ourselves in spiritual warfare. Ultimately, this is true with respect to every aspect of life -- for no part of life is unaffected by the spiritual warfare. And we must always rely on God for everything. We are not saying here, however, that you are to become paralyzed, frozen into inaction, because you cannot rely on yourself. Some things are self-evident: You must rise in the morning, clothe and feed your children, go to work, do your job, etc. Withal, however, learn that it is God upon Whom we are to rely in everything we do.
5. See note 3 above.
6. See note 3 above.
7. The **Mysteries** are what are often called **Sacraments** -- especially **Baptism**, **Chrismation**, the **Eucharist**, **Repentance-Confession**, **Marriage**, **Ordination**, and **Holy Unction**. Though these seven comprise what is known as the **Seven Holy Mysteries**, we must remember that all of life is sacramental and the mysteries of God are innumerable.
8. **Contrition** is not a widely used word today, but it is an extremely important one, not easily replaced. The word comes from the Latin "contritio", which means "a breaking of something hardened." How appropriate! Ezekiel writes the words of the Lord, "I do not desire the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11). And our Lord said, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). And He reports that the prodigal son said to his father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21). This is that depth of interior repentance which has been called "contrition." It involves sorrow deep within the soul and a hatred of the sin committed, as well as a steadfast intent not to sin in the future.

The early Christian writers, in speaking about contrition insist on these aspects, sometimes emphasizing the one, sometimes the other. Sorrow and remorse in the sense of mental agreement are not enough, nor is an intent to improve. Contrition involves learning pain and bitterness of soul, as well as hatred and even horror toward the sin committed. For a thorough discussion of contrition, admittedly from a Roman Catholic perspective, but profitable for Christians of all backgrounds, see the article on Contrition in Volume IV, The Catholic Encyclopedia, Encyclopedia Press, 1913.

9. See note 3 above.