

The Wisdom Of The Desert

Part 2, Section A: Spiritual Life and the Counsels

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Chapter 10. On Poverty.

If you will be perfect, go and sell all that you have,
and give to the poor... and come and follow Me.
— Saint Matthew 19:21.

Sell all that ye have, and give alms;
provide yourselves bags that wax not old,
a treasure in the heavens that fails not,
where no thief approaches, neither moth corrupts.
— Saint Luke 12:33.

If you will enter into life, keep the commandments.
If you will know the truth, believe Me.
If you will be perfect, sell all.
If you will be My disciple, deny yourself utterly.
If you will possess a blessed life, despise this life present.
— The Imitation of Christ, 3, 56.

Keep this short and perfect word:
Let go all, and you shall find all;
leave desire, and you shall find rest.

— The Imitation of Christ, 3, 32.

1. How a certain brother understood the words of the Lord very literally.

A certain old man was once asked by one of the brethren what a monk ought to do to be saved. The old man took his raiment and stripped it off. Then, stretching forth his hands, he said, "Thus ought a monk to be naked of all that belongs to this world. Thus also should he stretch himself out in crucifixion, that he may come out conqueror from the temptations and struggles of this world."

2. The advice of Saint Antony to a disciple who desired to be a monk, and yet was unwilling to give away all that he had.

A certain brother renounced the world, and gave what he possessed to the poor. Yet, because he was fearful of heart, and had little faith, he retained somewhat in his own power. This man paid a visit to Saint Antony. When the saint perceived how the case was with him, he said to him, "Go you to yonder village.

“There buy meat, and bind it with cords round your naked limbs. Then return to me.” The disciple did so, and lo! As he was returning to the saint the dogs from the village and afterwards the birds of the air, tore his limbs, grasping at the meat bound to them. On his return, the saint asked him how he had fared. He replied by displaying his wounds and blood.

Then said Saint Antony, “They who renounce the world, and yet desire to possess money, lo, like dogs and birds, the demons strive with them and tear them!”

3. Of the measure of renunciation, and when it may be regarded as complete.

An old man said, “Own nothing which it would grieve you to give to another, nothing which would lead you to transgress the commandment of the Lord — ‘Give to him that asks you’.”

4. The word of Serapion to a monk who owned what he was unwilling to part with.

A brother asked the abbot Serapion to speak some word of exhortation to him. Serapion said, “What can I say to you, seeing that you have taken the property of the widow and the orphan and put it on the window-sill of your cell?” He said this, having seen that this brother had many books, which he kept in his window.

5. How the same Serapion, who spoke thus, had himself made a perfect renunciation.

One of the monks, a certain Serapion, possessed a copy of the gospels. This he sold, and gave the price of it to the poor and hungry. Then he went home rejoicing, saying to himself, “Lo! Now I have sold even that very book which was for ever saying to me, ‘Sell all that you have and give to the poor’.”

6. A description of the sin of covetousness, through which men fail in making their renunciation perfect.

We must not only guard against the possession of money, but also expel from our souls the desire of possessing it. For it is necessary not so much to avoid the results of covetousness, as to cut off by the roots all disposition towards it. It will do no real good not to possess money, if there exists in us the desire of getting it.

7. The story of a monk who fell before a very subtle temptation, but in the end was saved.

The elders relate a story of a certain monk who was a skilful gardener. He laboured diligently, and all that he earned he gave to the poor after he had supplied his own necessities. After a while, Satan found entrance into his heart, and said to him, “Keep something of what you earn for yourself. Some day you will be old or fall sick, and then you will have need of what you can save now.” It seemed wise to the monk to do this, and he saved until he had filled a large pitcher with coins. It happened that he fell sick, and an abscess gathered on his foot. He expended all that he had saved on doctors, but neither was he made any better. At last, one of the most skilful doctors said to him, “Unless your foot is cut off you cannot recover. And they fixed a day for the amputation of his foot. That night he came again to his right mind, and wept bitterly for what he had done, being truly repentant. Then, groaning frequently, he prayed, and said, “Be mindful, O Lord, of the work which once I did, how I laboured in my garden and gave the reward of my labour to the poor.” When he had so prayed, behold an angel of the Lord stood by him and spoke to him, saying, “Where is now the money you saved? Where is the hope with which you saved it?” He, understanding well what the angel said, replied, “I have sinned! O Lord, pardon me. Henceforth I will do no such things as these for which you reproach me.”

Then the angel touched his foot, and immediately it was healed. In the morning, he arose and went forth to labour in his garden.

8. How all we give, we give to God, and not to men.

Melania relates that she brought three hundred pounds of silver to the abbot Pambo, and asked him to accept the gift for the use of the monks who were in need. He said to her, "May God give you your reward."

Then, turning to his servant Theodore, he said, "Take this money and distribute it among the brethren who dwell in Libya and in the islands, for the monasteries there are very poor." Melania, in the meanwhile, stood waiting for his benediction, and expected that he would speak some word of praise to her for the greatness of her gift. At length, when he remained silent, she said, "Master, do you know how much I have given? There are three hundred pounds of silver." But Pambo took no notice of her, and did not even glance at the boxes of money. At length he replied, "He to whom you make this gift, my daughter, does not need that you should tell Him how much it is. If you were giving this money to me, you would be right to tell me the sum of it. Since, however, you are giving this money to God, who did not despise even the two mites, but valued them above all other gifts, you may well be silent about the amount of it."

9. How a hermit refused to receive a gift of money, even for the use of the poor.

A certain man asked a hermit to receive a gift of money for his own use. He refused, saying that the earnings of his labour sufficed him. The other, however, besought him to take the money and use it for the poor, if not for himself. The hermit replied, "So I should run a double risk. I should take what I do not want. I should distribute what another gave, and be praised."

10. You cannot serve God and Mammon.

A certain brother once came to an elder, and said, "My father, of your kindness tell me, I beseech you, what I ought to strive for in my youth, that I may own something in my old age." The old man replied to him, "You may either gain Christ or gain money. It is for you to choose whether you will have for your God the Lord or mammon."

11. The story of three monks who were not greedy for money.

Once three brothers hired themselves out as harvest labourers, and agreed together to reap a certain field.

On the very first day of their labour, one of them fell sick and returned to his cell. The other two remained, and one of them said to the other, "You see how a sickness has fallen upon our brother so that he cannot work. Do you therefore do violence to yourself, and I shall do likewise. We shall put our trust in God. Our brother who is sick will pray for us. It may be that we shall be enabled to do double work and reap his part of the field as well as our own." They did as they had hoped, and reaped the whole field, which they had undertaken. On their way to receive their wages they called the brother who was sick, saying, "Come, brother, and receive your pay." But he said, "What pay shall I take, seeing I did not reap?" They replied, "It was through your prayers that the reaping was accomplished. Come, therefore, as we say, and get your wages." Then there was strife between them, for he kept saying, "I will take no pay, for I have done no work"; and they refused to take any wages at all unless he got his share. At last, they referred the matter to the judgment of a certain renowned elder.

The brother who had been sick told his story first: "We three went to reap a certain field for hire. When we came to the place where we were to work, on the very first day I fell sick. I returned to my cell, and from that time on, I did no work at all. Now these brethren come to me insisting and saying, 'Brother, come, take pay for work you did not do!' This is true." Then the other two brethren spoke and said, "We did, as he says, go to work, and did undertake to reap a certain field. It was such a field that if we had all three been there we could hardly by great toil have fulfilled our task. Yet through the power of this brother's prayers, we two were able to reap the whole field more quickly than the three of us expected to do it. Now when we say to him, 'Come and receive your hire,' he will not do so." When the old man who judged between them heard their stories, he marvelled greatly. Then he said, "Give the signal for the brothers to assemble."

When they were gathered together he said, "Listen, brethren, to the righteous judgment which I give." Then he told them the whole story, and gave his decision that the brother who had been sick should receive for his own the share of the pay, which ought to have been his. That brother, however, departed sorrowful, like one to whom an injury is done.

COMMENTARY 'On Poverty':

VOLUNTARY poverty is half-way between the kind of asceticism, which we have called physical and that which may properly be described as spiritual. On the one hand, it is clear that poverty like that of the hermits deprives a man not only of all the luxuries of life, but of what are generally regarded as its necessary comforts.

On the other hand, the sin, which stood in direct antithesis to their conception of poverty, was covetousness; and this is a sin of the soul, not of the body.

The absolute renunciation of all property was the initial act of the hermit's entrance upon his new life.

From the point of view of the fathers of monasticism, the necessity for this renunciation was obvious. Every possession was a tie to the world, and the great object was to get free of the world, to stand clear of its ambitions, its pleasures, and its cares. A man, who possesses property, even if he is content to forego the possibility of increasing it, must yet take care to preserve it. He must dedicate some portion of his time, his ability, and his energy to the getting or the management of his income. All such care and expenditure of strength was, from the hermits' point of view, a service of mammon, and they remembered the Lord's words — "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." There was no point, therefore, of their life on which the hermits insisted more vigorously than the completeness of the original renunciation.

What the postulant ought to do with his money was not definitely settled. Sometimes it was given to his relatives; sometimes it was handed over to the clergy for the use of the church. Oftenest, perhaps, in strict obedience to the Lord's command, it was given to the poor. Whatever the destiny of the money might be, it was essential for the hermit to get rid of it entirely. No half measures were tolerated. The parable, which Saint Antony made the young monk act, who wanted to keep something for himself, is almost savage in the intensity of its insistence on absolute renunciation. The personal possessions, which a monk might retain, were not, any more than the manner of his fasting, settled by definite rule. That their theory of poverty was spiritual, as opposed to mechanical, may be seen in the saying which described true poverty as the possession of nothing which it would cost a pang to give away. He who lives in such poverty as this, places no obstacle in the way of his fulfilment of the Lord's words — "Give to him that asks you."

How complete the renunciation occasionally became may be seen in a fine story of Besarion. He owned nothing in the world but a cloak, an undergarment, and a copy of the gospels. Once, as he went upon a journey, he threw his cloak over a dead body, which lay exposed on the roadside. Further on his way, he gave his other garment to a naked beggar. Then, moved by the recollection of the Lord's words, he sold his copy of the gospels and gave the proceeds to the poor.

Even, however, when the initial act of renunciation was as complete as possible, there still remained for the hermit the possibility of being ensnared by covetousness or entangled in worldly cares. It must not be forgotten that the hermits were diligent workers. They preferred such kinds of work as could be done in or near their cells. They wove mats and baskets, or cultivated little gardens; the fruits of their labour they sold, sometimes carrying them to neighbouring villages, sometimes sending them in boat-loads down the Nile to the great cities. At harvest-time, they frequently hired themselves out as labourers. The money thus earned they used first for the supply of the few necessities of their own lives, and what remained for the relief of the poor. The marketing of their goods was, as may readily be supposed, a distasteful task for them. Haggling and bargaining involved them in what must always be a degrading struggle. Some of them simply named a price for their goods, and then, if they were offered less, took it without protest. Others declined even to name a price. They exposed their wares in the market-place, and took the price offered by the first buyer who approached them.

Even, however, when their traffic was regulated by these principles, there remained a possibility of covetousness. There are grievous stories of men who hoarded little stores of money. Sometimes the motive seems to have been mere desire of possession. Sometimes it was, at first at all events, a less unworthy one. It was in order to make some provision for future sickness that the brother, whom the angel healed, began to lay by some portion of his earnings. All such saving was regarded as displaying, at the least, a lamentable want of faith. The ideal of the hermits was a perfect trust in Him who feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies of the field. To save and make provision for the future was to call down the Lord's rebuke — “Oh, ye of little faith.”

Chapter 11. On Obedience.

I came not to do Mine own will.

— Saint John 6:38.

Be desirous, my son, to do the will of another rather than your own.

— Imitation of Christ, 3, 23.

Thirty years of Our Lord's life are hidden in these words,
“He was subject unto them.”

— Bossuet.

1. The praise of the virtue of obedience.

Oh, my son, good indeed is that obedience which is rendered for the Lord's sake. See to it, therefore, that your feet are placed upon the pathway that leads to the perfection of obedience. In obedience is the safety of all faithful souls. Obedience is the mother of all kinds of virtue.

Obedience discovers the road that leads to heaven. It is obedience that opens heaven's gates and raises men above the earth. Obedience has her home among the angels. Obedience is the food of all the saints. From her breasts, they suck the milk of life, and grow up to the measure of perfection.

2. The vision, which one of the fathers saw, wherein was manifested the greatness of obedience.

One of the fathers, being in a trance, saw four kinds of men standing before God. First, he saw those who, though they suffer in the body and are sick, yet give thanks to God. Next were those who give themselves to hospitality and are devoted to the relief of others' needs. Next were they who dwell in solitude and see not the faces of men. The fourth kind were they who strive to be obedient and submit themselves unto the will of the fathers.

He beheld, and lo! This last kind was superior to the other three. They were wearing golden crowns, and had received an excellent glory above the glory of the rest.

Then the old man spoke to him who showed the vision to him, saying, "Why has this fourth kind of men a greater glory than the others?"

He was answered thus, "They all find some satisfaction in doing the things they wish to do, albeit the things they wish are all of them good. He, however, who obeys renounces the fulfilment of his own will. He gives himself up to the will of the father who orders him. Therefore to his share there falls an excellent glory above the glory of the rest."

3. How obedience is no virtue if we only render it to those whose commands are according to our inclinations.

There was a brother once who said to a famous elder, "Father, I wish to find an old man with whom to dwell. I seek for one whose ways will be altogether according to my ideas of what is right. With him I wish to live and die." The elder said to him, "Of a truth you are on a noble quest, my master." Then he repeated his desire, being proud of it, and not understanding the meaning of the other's words. When the elder perceived that he still regarded his desire as a good and noble one, he said to him, "Then, if you find an old man whose ways answer to what you think is right, do you think that you will stay with him?" The brother replied, "Certainly I should stay with such a one if he indeed answered to my expectations." Then said the elder again, "Do you not see that you would not be following the teaching of him whom you seek for a master? You would be simply walking according to your own will." Then that brother, understanding what the old man said to him, fell at his feet in penitence and said, "Pardon me, for certainly I have boasted greatly. I thought that I was saying what was good, and all the while there was no trace even of goodness in my words."

4. The obedience of Mark, the disciple of Silvanus.

The abbot Silvanus had a disciple whose name was Mark. He was remarkable for his obedience, and therefore Silvanus loved him. Now he had also eleven other disciples, and they were vexed because Mark was more beloved than they were. When the elders heard this, they were grieved, and came to Silvanus, intending to ask him to give up his favourite, since the brethren were offended. Before they had said anything, Silvanus took them with him to make a round of the various cells. He called each monk by his name, saying, "Come out, for I have work for you to do." No single one of them was willing to come out. The last of all of those to whom they came was Mark. Silvanus knocked at his door, and called his name. Immediately Mark came out, hearing his master's voice. Then the abbots entered Mark's cell. Now Mark was a writer who copied books.

Looking at the manuscript at which he had been at work, they found that he had left unfinished the letter, which he was forming when he heard the voice of the old man. This he had done that his obedience might be prompt. Then said the other elders to Silvanus, "Truly him, whom you love, we also love; and no doubt God loves him because of his obedience."

COMMENTARY 'On Obedience':

OBEDIENCE is the sacrifice of self-will. It may consist passively in a man's refusing to insist on acting in accordance with his own conception of what is pleasant, or his conviction of what is expedient or right. It may involve an act or a course of action directly opposed to such convictions. The Egyptian hermits recognized unquestioning obedience as a great virtue. The language in which they praise it is fervid. Its place in the hierarchy of virtues is supreme. The examples, which are quoted for imitation, show that no idea of compromise was to be entertained. It is apparent at once that the general conscience of mankind endorses under certain circumstances all that the hermits taught about obedience. The citizen of a state must submit to the will of the power that governs. The soldier must obey promptly and unquestioningly the orders of his officer. The sailor has no right of self-assertion against the will of his captain. No consideration of the justice or injustice of a law will absolve a citizen from obeying it so long as it continues to be the law. No conviction of the folly or inexpediency of an order can be held to justify the mutiny of the soldier or the sailor. Under certain circumstances, we are as much convinced as the hermits were that obedience without delay or protest is an essential duty — is even the highest virtue. Of all conceivable circumstances, only one is generally held to justify disobedience. If obedience involves, directly and unmistakably, a transgression of the law of God, then every man, citizen, soldier, sailor, or monk is held to be right in disobeying.

So far, there is nothing in the hermits' position about obedience, which seems to conflict with the feeling even of men fundamentally opposed to monasticism. Nevertheless, there is felt to be a difference somewhere.

A man who willingly recognises the soldier's obedience to his officer as a virtue, finds a feeling of irritated hostility arise in his mind at the contemplation of a monk's obedience to his abbot. Here, as very often elsewhere, a feeling, which is, as one may say, instinctive to many men, is found upon examination to have a reasonable justification. The obedience of the hermit is a different thing from that of the soldier or the sailor. It rests upon a different basis, aims at a different result. The soldier obeys because, without discipline, an army is a useless mob. The sailor obeys because considerations for the common safety necessitate the predominance of one man's will. If the conditions, which necessitate obedience are removed, obedience itself ceases to be a virtue, and may become even a vice. When a volunteer regiment is disbanded, at the end of a war, the trooper no longer owes, or is supposed to owe, any kind of obedience whatever to the man who was his officer. When a ship comes to a port, and the crew is paid off, the sailor has no special duty to his captain. This is only to say that obedience is regarded simply as a necessary condition for success in all cases where combined effort is required. Once the success is attained, there is no more reason for obedience.

Apart from the obvious advantages of discipline, obedience — that is, obedience simply for the sake of obeying — strikes the ordinary conscience as silly, if not actually wrong. The hermits looked at the matter altogether differently. To them obedience was not a means of perfecting any organisation, but was a virtue in itself. It was one of the marks of the ideally perfect character. A hermit obeyed his abbot or his elder brother because he wanted to be good, and being good involved the total conquest of that self whose outworks were passions and lusts, but whose last stronghold was the desire to express in act its own convictions and will. Here we see why in the case of the hermit the wisdom or folly, the expediency or inexpediency of the command given were quite unimportant.

John of Lycopolis was ordered, when he was young, to plant and water a dried-up stick. In itself, the command was a silly one. Neither planting nor watering made any difference to the stick.

Obedience or disobedience did, however, make all the difference possible for John. He obeyed, and by obeying, built up within himself a certain character. He so far annihilated self and self-will that it ultimately became possible for him to receive direct revelations of the divine purpose. He might have disobeyed. Then also he would have built up a character — forceful, dominant, masterful — but not such as enables a man to be the intimate friend of Jesus Christ.

The judgment, which condemns obedience like John's as a worthless waste of time and energy, is based upon a mistaken estimate of the relative value of what a man is and what he does. John, and others like him, might have spent their time in doing things that would have seemed to us more useful. Supposing that they had, the value of their work would be all exhausted centuries ago. The fields they dug would have gone back to barrenness or been dug again a thousand times. But the character, which these men built up, by God's grace, is to-day, as we believe, in Paradise a joy to the angels, a glory to the Master whom they served. By asserting themselves against a command, which seemed foolish, they might have accomplished something effective for a year or two. They might have cast deeds, like stones, into the pool of human life, have watched the waters splash and ripple, and close calm again. By obeying they built into eternity, reared the fabric of a beautiful and everlasting human soul.

Chapter 12. On Avoiding the Praise of Men.

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men,
to be seen of them.

— Saint Matthew 6:1.

When you pray, you shall not be as the hypocrites are:
for they love to pray... that they may be seen of men.

— Saint Matthew 6: 5.

When you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face
that you appear not unto men to fast.

— Saint Matthew 6:17-18.

Never desire to be singularly commended or beloved,
for that pertains only unto God, who has none like unto Himself.

— The Imitation of Christ, 2, 8.

Mere empty glory is in truth an evil pest, the greatest of vanities;
because it draws man from the true glory, and robs him of heavenly grace.

— The Imitation of Christ, 3, 40.

1. A saying concerning virtue, how it should be hidden.

A certain one said, "As treasure when it is discovered speedily becomes less, so virtue made known unto man vanishes. As wax melts at the fire, so the virtue of the soul is thawed and runs away when it is praised."

2. A warning against the danger of being praised.

A brother once asked the abbot Mathoës: "If I go to dwell in any place, what shall I do there?"

The old man answered him, "If you dwell in any place, do not make a name for yourself there for anything. Do not say that you will not join the meetings of the brethren, or that you will not eat this or that. So doing, you will make a name for yourself. Afterwards you will perhaps be praised and become famous. Then others will come to inquire of you concerning the way of life, and your own soul will be injured by their frequent comings."

3. "Love to be unknown."

The abbot Zeno, the disciple of Silvanus, said, "Never dwell in a famous place, or make a friend of a famous man."

4. The advice of the abbot Macarius to those who desire eminence.

Saint Macarius once said, "Do not desire, nor, if you can help it, permit yourself to be made the head of a congregation, lest perhaps you lay the weight of other men's sins upon your neck."

5. A story of the abbot Nisteros, how he escaped the temptation of vainglory.

The abbot Nisteros the elder was one day walking in the desert with one of his disciples. Seeing a serpent in their path, they both turned and fled from it.

Then the disciple said, "My father, were you afraid?" The old man answered him, "I was not afraid, my son, but it was better for me that I should flee before the serpent. If I had not at once fled from it, I should afterwards have had to flee before the spirit of vainglory."

6. A story of the abbot Sisois, how he avoided being praised by one who wished to admire his way of life.

On one occasion, a certain judge wished to pay a visit to the abbot Sisois. Some of the clergy went beforehand, and said to him, "Father, prepare yourself, for the judge has heard of your works and your piety, and is coming to visit you. He desires also to receive your benediction."

Sisois said, "I shall do as you desire. I shall prepare myself for his visit." Then he clad himself in his best garments, took bread and cheese in his hands, and seating himself with outstretched feet at the door of his cell, began to eat. When the judge with his retinue arrived and saw him, he said, "Is this the famous anchorite of whom I heard so much?" So, despising Sisois, he departed.

7. A comparison, which shows the nature of vainglory.

The elders admirably describe the nature of this malady as like that of an onion, and of those bulbs which when stripped of one covering you find to be sheathed in another; and as often as you strip them you find them still protected. All other vices when overcome grow feeble, and when beaten are rendered day by day weaker. But vainglory, which is the desire of praise, when it is beaten rises again keener than ever for the struggle. When we think it is destroyed it revives again, and is stronger than ever on account of its death. The other kinds of vices only attack those whom they have overcome in the conflict. This one pursues those who are victorious over it all the more keenly. The more thoroughly it has been resisted, so much the more vigorously does it attack the man who is elated by his victory over it.

8. A word of Saint Antony, teaching that he who suffers himself to be counted foolish, alone is wise.

Some of the elders once visited Saint Antony, and with them came the abbot Joseph. Saint Antony, wishing to prove what manner of men they were, started a question about the meaning of a passage

of Scripture. One by one, they gave their opinions about the meaning of it. To each of them he said, "You have not hit it."

At last, it came to the turn of the abbot Joseph, and the saint said to him, "In what way do you understand this passage?" He replied, "I do not know." Then said Saint Antony, "Truly, the abbot Joseph has discovered the way in which Scripture is to be interpreted, for he acknowledges his own ignorance."

9. Of the subtlety of the temptation of vainglory, which is the pleasure of being praised by men.

Our other faults and passions are simpler, and have each of them but one form. This one takes many forms and shapes, and changes about and assails the man who stands up against it from every quarter, and assaults even him who conquers it on every side. It tries to find occasion for injuring the servant of Christ in his dress, in his manner, his walk, his voice, his work, his vigils, his fasts, his prayers. It lies in wait for him when he withdraws to solitude, when he reads, in his knowledge, his silence, his obedience, his humility, his patience.

It is like some most dangerous rock hidden by the waves. It causes miserable shipwreck to those who are sailing with a fair breeze, while they are not on the look out or guarding against it.

10. A rebuke of ostentation.

There was a certain brother who practised abstinence from various kinds of food, and especially refused to eat bread. He went once to visit a renowned elder. As it happened, while he was there, some strangers arrived, and the old man prepared a scanty meal for them. When they sat down to eat, the brother who practiced abstinence would eat nothing except a single bean. When they rose from the table, the elder took him apart privately, and said to him, "Brother, when you are in the company of others do not be anxious to display your own way of living. If you really wish to keep your rule of life unbroken, sit in your own cell and never leave it." When he heard these words, he felt that the elder was right. Therefore, ever afterwards he conformed his ways to those of the brethren among whom he found himself.

COMMENTARY 'On Vainglory':

THAT is a fine saying in which vainglory is compared to an onion or other bulbous root. In the region of spiritual asceticism, there is no struggle more difficult than that against the spirit of vainglory. The desire of being praised — and this is what the hermits meant by vainglory — is natural to every man, Christian or pagan, good or bad. In whatever sphere of human activity a man may elect to spend his energies, the praise of some men will wait for him. One man may desire and work for the praise of the crowd, another may find a subtler measure in the congratulations of the few. To one, it is enough that the multitude should reckon him to be a good man and throng to listen to his teaching. To another, the recognition of his merits by the multitude seems in itself a kind of condemnation. He desires the less audible approbation of the one or two whose own righteousness constitutes them fit judges of what is good. Some men are found openly exulting in being praised. No flattery is too coarse or obvious for them. When it is withheld, they demand it blatantly. Others shrink from the sound of open praise, and yet go through life, cautiously feeling about for signs of the esteem in which their neighbours hold them. The hermit who compared the love of praise to an onion had probed far down into human weakness. His sight was keen when he saw that to escape the desire of praise for one kind of virtue is to find oneself seeking it all the more earnestly for

another, until the soul is caught in the paradox of desiring to be known as one who does not wish for praise at all.

Vainglory must not be confused with pride. It is the strong man who is proud. In proportion as he grows stronger, he feels less and less need for the approbation of others. Milton's heroic Satan may stand as a type of strength and pride. We do not think of him as troubled much about any judgment passed on him. He neither seeks praise nor dreads blame. It is our weakness, which makes us long for approbation. We are not sure enough of ourselves to stand alone or persevere without someone to tell us we are doing well. Thus, pride and vainglory are opposed to each other. They are the besetting sins of opposite types of character. A man may even be cured of overmuch desire of praise by teaching him to be proud enough to disregard the opinions of the crowd about his acts. Yet it was not because vainglory was an indication of weakness that the hermits strove so hard against it, nor was it along the way of pride and strength that they sought to escape. They thought of virtue as such a tender plant that the breath of praise withered it. Goodness, in their opinion, actually ceased to be the highest kind of goodness when it was recognised. The ideal was to live and die unknown.

I do not remember that the hermits ever appealed directly to the example of the Lord in their shrinking from vainglory, but I am sure that their teaching was entirely in accordance with the spirit of His life. For far the greater part of the time of His dwelling among us, He chose to remain unknown. Even when the fulfilment of His mission involved His doing works which some men were sure to praise, He strove by all means to avoid publicity. The very manner of His great sacrifice of Himself was so devoid of all obvious heroism that it was only after its consummation that His lifting up began to draw all men unto Him.

Just as it was not because the desire of praise is a sign of weakness that the hermits condemned it, so it was not by trying to be strong and independent that they avoided it. The story of the abbot Nisteros' flight from the serpent is so quaint that at first the reader is moved only to smile. Yet in it, we find a man avoiding the peril of being praised by a display of weakness and even cowardice. So, too, the abbot Sisois does not try to attain that position of haughty isolation, which would have made him indifferent to the judge's praise or blame. He, like Nisteros, in order to avoid vainglory, deliberately courts contempt. He aims at being despised, lest the Lord's "woe" should fall upon him, and men learn to speak well of him.

Chapter 13. On Anger.

Every one who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; and whosoever shall say, You fool, shall be in danger of the hell of fire.

— Saint Matthew 5:22 (Revised Version).

Nothing so stills the elephant when enraged as the sight of a lamb; nor does anything break the force of a cannon-ball so well as wool.

Correction given in anger, however tempered by reason,
never has so much effect as that which is given altogether without anger;
for the reasonable soul, being naturally subject to reason,
it is a tyranny which subjects it to passion,
and wherever reason is led by passion
it becomes odious, and its just rule obnoxious.

— Saint Francis of Sales, *The Devout Life*, 8.

1. The teaching of a certain elder, concerning the nature and origin of anger.

A certain elder said, Anger arises through four things —
through the greed of avarice, whether in giving or receiving;
also through loving and defending one's own opinion;
through a desire of being honourably exalted;
also through wishing to be learned or hoping to be wise above all others.

In four ways, anger darkens the nature of a man —
when he hates his neighbour,
when he envies him,
when he despises him,
and when he belittles him.

In four places, anger finds scope —
first in the heart,
second in the face,
third in the tongue,
fourth in the act.

Thus if a man can bear injury, so that the bitterness of it does not enter into his heart, then anger will not appear in his face.

If, however, it find expression in his face, he still may guard his tongue so as to give no utterance of it.

If even here he fail and give it utterance with his tongue, yet let him not translate his words into acts, but hastily dismiss them from his memory.

Men are of three kinds, according to the place which anger finds in them.

He who is hurt and injured, and yet spares his persecutor, is a man after the pattern of Christ.

He who is neither hurt himself, nor desires to hurt another, is a man after the pattern of Adam.

He who hurts or slanders another is a man after the pattern of the Devil.

2. How we must not suppose that the spirit of anger is dead in us when we happen to escape for a time from the things, which are wont to arouse it.

Anger is like all poisonous kinds of serpents and wild beasts, which while they remain in solitude and in their own lairs are still not harmless; for they cannot really be said to be harmless because they are not actually hurting anyone. For this results in such a case, not from any feeling of goodness, but from the exigencies of solitude. When they have secured an opportunity of hurting anyone, at once they produce the poison that is stored up in them, and show the ferocity of their nature. So in the case of men who are aiming at perfection, it is not enough not to be angry with men. I recollect that when I was dwelling in solitude a feeling of irritation would creep over me against my pen because it was too large or too small; against my penknife when it cut badly or with a blunt edge what I wanted cut; and against a flint if by chance when I was rather late and hurrying to the reading, a spark of fire flashed out. Then I could not get rid of my perturbation of mind except by cursing the senseless matter or, at least, the devil. Therefore for one who is aiming at perfection it is not enough that there should be no men who afford occasion for anger. If the virtue of patience has not been acquired, the feelings of passion, which still dwell in his heart, can equally well spend themselves on dumb things and paltry objects, and not allow him to gain continuous peace.

3. Of a certain brother who tried to avoid the occasions rather than conquer the spirit of anger.

A certain brother was frequently moved to anger while he dwelt in a monastery.

He said, therefore within himself, “I shall go forth into solitude, and when I have no one to quarrel with I shall find rest from this spirit of anger.”

So he went and dwelt in a certain cave. One day, after he had filled his pitcher and placed it on the ground, it was suddenly upset. Three times, he filled it, and three times in the same way, the water was spilled.

Then, in a rage, he seized the vessel and broke it. When he came to himself, and began to consider how he had been trapped by the demon of anger, he said, “Lo, I am here alone, and yet I have been vanquished by anger. I shall return to my monastery, because, wherever there is most need of striving and of patience, there, no doubt, chiefly is the grace of God to be found.” Then, rising up, he returned to his own place.

4. How by gentleness we may overcome another’s anger.

A certain old man had a faithful disciple. Once, in a fit of anger, he drove him from his cell. The disciple waited all night outside the door. In the morning, the old man opened it, and, when he saw him, was struck with shame, and said, “You are my father now, because your humility and patience have conquered my sin.

“Come in again, and from henceforth be you the elder and the father. I will be the disciple, for you have surpassed me, though I am aged.”

5. The advice of an elder, showing how we may avoid feeling angry with those who injure us.

A certain monk was injured by one of the brethren. He told what had happened to one of the elders, who said to him, “Let your mind be at peace. The brother has done no injury to you, nor must you think he wished to. He has done injury to your sins. In any trial, which comes to you through man, do not blame the man, but just say, ‘On account of my sins this thing has befallen me’.”

6. He who is a slave to anger is not likely to conquer other sins.

A certain one said, If a man cannot bridle his tongue in the moment of anger, he will certainly not be able to be victorious over any lust of his flesh.

COMMENTARY ‘On Anger’:

THE only point which is really peculiar in the hermits’ teaching about anger is that it seems that the possibility of righteous anger is altogether denied. No matter how wicked a brother might be, or how serious the consequence of his sin, it was not right to be angry with him. To try to cure another of sin by angry denunciation was the same thing as for a physician to try to cure his patient by inoculating himself with a similar fever, for to be angry even with sinfulness is to sin.

Apart from this one point, the hermits’ teaching is only remarkable for the accuracy of its analysis of the source from which anger springs, and its thoroughness in the practical treatment of the fault.

Anger is traced back to the hermits’ most intimate enemy — self. It is an expression of selfishness, a sign that self has not wholly and really been conquered. Thus, anger may spring from avarice. It is then the protest of self against any interference with what are regarded as possessions. Where the renunciation of property is really complete, this kind of anger becomes impossible. There is a

beautiful story of two hermits who determined to find out by experience what it was like to be angry. They planned that each of them should claim for his own an earthen pot, which lay in their cell.

The attempted quarrel began well enough, for the first monk said, "The pot is mine," and the second replied to him, "No, it is mine."

But at this point, the first man's resolution broke down, and he said, "As you say, brother, it is yours." This hermit had so entirely renounced the satisfaction of possessing anything that it was as impossible for him to grow angry in a dispute about property as it would be for a sensible man to do battle with a child for the sake of some treasure of broken glass or coloured stone. The desire of impressing his own will or opinions upon others is another sign that the old self in a man is not wholly dead. Where such a desire exists in any strength, and others thwart it, the result is anger. In the same way vainglory, when it is starved for want of praise, and pride when it proves to be indulged in foolishly, give birth to anger. Vainglory and pride are alike vices of selfishness.

The hermits distinguished various stages of anger, to each of which was attached a certain degree of guilt.

There was first the feeling of anger in the heart, the sudden rush of bitter feeling consequent on suffering unjustly. This cannot be fought against. It may be avoided only by those in whom the old self is utterly dead.

Next comes the expression of anger on the countenance. It is at this point that the hermits' battle with anger really begins. It is possible to choke down at once the emotion so that not even the tightened lips or frowning brow betray its presence. Then there is the vent which anger finds in words. Here is another point of defence for the hermit. He may and ought to be able to bridle his tongue. The final stage of anger is when a man so loses self-control as to strike or injure another. It is something to have stopped short of this.

There is an altogether different kind of anger, which has its origin not in the negative side of the religious life, through failure to eradicate the old selfish instincts, but in the positive side, in coming short of absorbing interest in divine things. To the hermit who fell away from his loving desire for the Lord, whose mind ceased to be dominated by visions of the King in His beauty, the life of the cell or the community became an intolerable weariness. A craving for change and excitement seized upon him. The monotony of his daily round alternately oppressed and goaded him. In this condition, he was a ready prey to peevishness and irritability. He flew into sudden fits of unreasoning fury with brothers who had in no way offended him; or if human objects were absent, vented his ill-humour by cursing his pen or his knife or the stones on the road when his feet tripped on them. This kind of anger was the result of a morbid spiritual state, which the hermits recognised as sinful, and called accidie.

To fly from the circumstances, which gave excuse for its expression was manifestly useless. It is possible to fly from men but not, as the hermit in the story found, from the demon who excites to this kind of anger. Even the attainment of a sleepy apathy is not a real cure for it. The serpent is venomous.

Still venomous he is, though he lies torpid and bites no one. The true cure lies in the renewal of the broken communion with God. Then the weariness and accidie give place to active joy, and the temptation to sudden anger-fits disappears.

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