

The Philokalia Volume 4a

by Desert Fathers

The sermon explores the transformative power of faith through the story of a young man's spiritual journey and the importance of aligning actions with belief in God.

Scripture: Psalm 42:5, Matthew 3:2, Matthew 5:8, Matthew 7:15, Luke 18:27, Luke 21:34, 1 Corinthians 15:49, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Galatians 3:27, Ephesians 5:6

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Repentance"

Description

St. Symeon the New Theologian emphasizes the importance of faith, humility, and obedience in the journey of spiritual growth and union with God. He shares stories and teachings on the transformative power of true repentance, the necessity of detachment from worldly concerns, and the significance of purity of heart in experiencing God's grace. St. Symeon highlights the role of spiritual fathers in guiding individuals towards spiritual maturity and the challenges of discerning true virtue from hypocrisy in the spiritual path.

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St Symeon the New Theologian

On Faith

Brethren and fathers, it is good that we make God's mercy known to all and speak to those close to us of the

compassion and inexpressible bounty He has shown us. For as you know I neither fasted, nor kept vigils, nor slept

on bare ground, but - to borrow the Psalmist's words - 'I humbled myself and, in short, 'the Lord saved me'.

Or, to put it even more briefly, I did no more than believe and the Lord accepted me (cf. Ps. 116:6, 10; 27:10.

LXX). Many things stand in the way of our acquiring humility, but there is nothing that prevents us from having

faith. For if we want it with all our heart, it will immediately become active in us, since it is God's gift to us and a

pre-eminent characteristic of our nature, even though it is also subject to our individual power of free will. That is

why even Scythians and other outlandish peoples have faith in each other's words. Yet to demonstrate through actual

facts the effect of our deeply rooted faith and to confirm what I have just said, I will tell you a story related to me by

someone who was entirely trustworthy.

A man by the name of George, young in age - he was about twenty - was living in Constantinople during our own

times. He was good-looking, and so studied in dress, manners and gait, that some of those who take note only of

outer appearances and harshly judge the behavior of others began to harbor malicious suspicions about him. This

young man, then, made the acquaintance of a holy monk who lived in one of the monasteries in the city; and to him

he opened his soul and from him he received a short rule which he had to keep in mind. He also asked him for a

book giving an account of the ways of monks and their ascetic practices; so the elder gave him the work of Mark the

Monk, On the Spiritual Law. This the young man accepted as though it had been sent by God Himself, and in the

expectation that he would reap richly from it he read it from end to end with eagerness

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and attention. And though he benefited from the whole work, there were three passages only which he fixed in his

heart.

The first of these three passages read as follows: 'If you desire spiritual health, listen to your conscience, do all it

tells you, and you will benefit.' The second passage read: 'He who seeks the energies of the Holy Spirit before he has

actively observed the commandments is like someone who sells himself into slavery and who, as soon as he is

bought, asks to be given his freedom while still keeping his purchase -money.' And the third passage said the

following: 'Blind is the man crying out and saying: "Son of David, have mercy upon me" (Luke 18:38). He prays

with his body alone, and not yet with spiritual knowledge. But when the man once blind received his sight and saw

the Lord, he acknowledged Him no longer as the Son of David but as the Son of God, and worshipped Him' (cf.

John 9:38).

On reading these three passages the young man was struck with awe and fully believed that if he examined his

conscience he would benefit, that if he practiced the commandments he would experience the energy of the Holy

Spirit, and that through the grace of the Holy Spirit he would recover his spiritual vision and would see the Lord.

Wounded thus with love and desire for the Lord, he expectantly sought His primal beauty, however hidden it might

be. And, he assured me, he did nothing else except carry out every evening, before he went to bed, the short rule

given to him by the holy elder. When his conscience told him, 'Make more prostrations, recite additional psalms, and

repeat "Lord, have mercy" more often, for you can do so', he readily and unhesitatingly obeyed, and did everything

as though asked to do it by God Himself. And from that time on he never went to bed with his conscience

reproaching him and saying, 'Why have you not done this?' Thus, as he followed it scrupulously, and as daily it

increased its demands, in a few days he had greatly added to his evening office.

During the day he was in charge of a patrician's household and each day he went to the palace, engaging in the

tasks demanded by such a life, so that no one was aware of his other pursuits. Every evening tears flowed from his

eyes, he multiplied the prostrations he made with his face to the ground, his feet together and rooted to the spot on

which

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he stood. He prayed assiduously to the Mother of God with sighs and tears, and as though the Lord was physically

present he fell at His most pure feet, while like the blind man he besought mercy and asked that the eyes of his soul

should be opened. As his prayers lasted longer every evening, he continued in this way until midnight, never

growing slack or indolent during this period, his whole body under control, not moving his eyes or looking up. He

stood still as a statue or a bodiless spirit.

One day, as he stood repeating more in his intellect than with his mouth the words, 'God, have mercy upon me, a

sinner' (Luke 18:13), suddenly a profuse flood of divine light appeared above him and filled the whole room. As this

happened the young man lost his bearings, forgetting whether he was in a house or under a roof; for he saw nothing

but light around him and did not even know that he stood upon the earth. He had no fear of falling, or awareness of

the world, nor did any of those things that beset men and bodily beings enter his mind. Instead he was wholly united

to non-material light, so much so that it seemed to him that he himself had been transformed into light. Oblivious of

all else, he was filled with tears and with inexpressible joy and gladness. Then his intellect ascended to heaven and

beheld another light, more lucid than the first. Miraculously there appeared to him, standing close to that light, the

holy, angelic elder of whom we have spoken and who had given him the short rule and the book.

When I heard this story, I thought how greatly the intercession of this saint had helped the young man, and how

God had chosen to show him to what heights of virtue the holy man had attained.

When this vision was over and the young man, as he told me, had come back to himself, he was struck with joy

and amazement. He wept with all his heart, and sweetness mingled with his tears. Finally he fell on his bed, and at

that moment the cock crowed, announcing the middle of the night. Shortly after the church bells rang for matins and

he got up as usual to chant the office, not having had a thought of sleep during the whole night.

As God knows - for He brings things about according to decisions of which He alone is aware - all this happened

without the young man having done anything more than you have heard. But what he did he did with true faith and

unhesitating expectation. And let it not be said that he did these things by way of an experiment, for he had never

spoken or thought of acting in such a spirit. Indeed, to make

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experiments and to try things out is evidence of a lack of faith. On the contrary, after rejecting every passion-

charged and self-indulgent thought this young man, as he himself assured me, paid such attention to what his

conscience said that he regarded all material things of his with indifference, and did not even find pleasure in food

and drink, or want to partake of them frequently.

You have heard, my brethren, what great things faith in God can bring about when it is confirmed by actions. You

will have realized that youth is not to be despised and that without understanding and fear of God old age is useless.

You have learnt that the heart of a city cannot prevent us from practicing God's commandments so long as we are

diligent and watchful, nor can stillness or withdrawal from the world be of any benefit if we are lazy and negligent.

We have certainly all heard of David, and we admire him and say that he is unique and there cannot be another like

him. Yet here, lo and behold, is something more than David. For David was specially chosen by God: he was

anointed to be prophet and king; he was inspired by the Holy Spirit; and he was granted many revelations concerning God. Thus when he sinned and was deprived of the grace of the Spirit and of his gift of prophecy, and

was estranged from his usual communion with God, is there anything astonishing in the fact that he should recall the

state of grace from which he had fallen and should ask to enjoy those privileges once more (cf Ps. 51:1-12)? But

our young man had never even conceived of any of these things. He was devoted only to what is transient and

worldly, and he could imagine nothing superior to such things. Yet - how unpredictable are Thy ways. Lord - he had

only to hear of these divine realities and he believed in them immediately; indeed, he believed so surely that he

implemented his faith in corresponding action. It was thanks to this action that his mind took wing and rose to

heaven, drawing to it the compassion of Christ's Mother. Through her intercession God was appeased and bestowed

on him the grace of the Spirit. This gave him the strength to rise to heaven and to behold the light that everyone

longs for but very few attain.

This young man had not observed long fasts or slept on the ground, worn a hair shirt or shaved his head, nor had

he shunned the world physically, though he had in spirit, by keeping a few vigils; yet he appeared to be superior to

Lot, so renowned in Sodom (cf. Gen. 19). Or, rather, although in a body, he was an angel, constrained yet unconstrained, visible but transcending physicality, human in appearance

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but immaterial when perceived spiritually, outwardly all things to all men (cf. 1 Cor. 9:22) but inwardly solely

present to God alone, the knower of all things. Thus when the visible sun set, he found that its place was taken by

the tender light of spiritual luminosity, which is the pledge and foretaste of the unceasing light that is to succeed it.

And this was as it should be; for the love of that for which he was searching took him out of the world, beyond

nature and all material things, filling him wholly with the Spirit and transforming him into light. And all this

happened to him while he was living in the middle of the city, and was steward of a house, having in his charge

slaves and free men and carrying out all the tasks incumbent on such a life.

Enough has been said in praise of this young man and to stimulate you to a similar longing, in imitation of him.

Or would you still like me to speak of other things, greater than these - things which perhaps you might not be able

to take in? Yet what can be greater or more perfect than the fear of God? Indeed, nothing is greater than this. It is as

St Gregory of Nazianzos has written: "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1 :7). For where there is

fear, there the commandments are kept, and where the commandments are kept the flesh is purified, together with

the cloud that envelops the soul and prevents it from clearly seeing the divine radiance. Where there is this

purification there is illumination, and illumination is the fulfillment of the longing of those who desire the greatest of

all supernal things or even that which is above all greatness." With these words he showed that illumination by the

Spirit is the endless end of every virtue, and that whoever attains it has finished with everything sensory and has

begun to experience the knowledge of spiritual realities.

Such, my brethren, are the wonders of God. And God reveals His hidden saints so that some may emulate them

and others have no excuse for not doing so. Provided they live a worthy life, both those who choose to dwell in the

midst of noise and hubbub and those who dwell in monasteries, mountains and caves can achieve salvation. Solely

because of their faith in Him God bestows great blessings on them. Hence those who because of their laziness have

failed to attain salvation will have no excuse to offer on the day of judgment. For He who promised to grant us

salvation simply on account of our faith in Him is not a liar. So show mercy to yourselves and to us who love you

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and often grieve and shed tears for you - for this is what the merciful and compassionate God has asked us to do.

Trust in the Lord with all your soul. Leave the world and everything that passes away, and draw close to God and

cleave to Him; for in a little while 'heaven and earth will pass away' (Matt. 24:35), and apart from Him there will be

no firm ground on which to stand, no limit, nothing to check the fall of sinners. God is infinite and cannot be grasped. Tell me, then, if you can, what place there will be for those who fall away from His kingdom?

I grieve, I exhaust my heart, I pine for you when I bring to mind that we have a Lord so bountiful and

compassionate that simply if we have faith in Him He grants us gifts beyond our imagination - gifts we have never

heard or thought of and that 'man's heart has not grasped' (1 Cor. 2:9). Yet we, like beasts, prefer the earth and the

things of the earth that through His great mercy it yields in order to supply our bodily needs; and if we use these

things modestly, then our soul may ascend unhampered towards divine realities, nourished spiritually by the Holy

Spirit according to the degree of our purification and to the level to which we have ascended.

This is our purpose, for this we were created and brought forth: that after having received lesser blessings in this

world we may through our gratitude to God and our love for Him enjoy great and eternal blessings in the life to

come. But, alas, far from having any concern for the blessings in store, we are even ungrateful for those at hand, and

we are like the demons, or - if truth be told - even worse. Thus we deserve greater punishment than they, for we

have been given greater blessings. For we know that God became for our sakes like us in everything except sin, so

that He might deliver us from delusion and free us from sin. But what is the use of saying this? The truth is that we

believe in all these things only as words, while we deny them where our acts are concerned. Is not Christ's name

uttered everywhere, in towns and villages, in monasteries and on mountains? Search diligently, if you will, and find

out whether anyone keeps His commandments. Among thousands and myriads you will scarcely find one who is a

Christian both in word and in act. Did not our Lord and God say in the Gospel, 'He that believes in Me will also do

what I do - indeed, he will do greater things' (John 14:12)? But which of us dares to say, 'I do Christ's work and I

truly believe in Christ?' Do you not see, brethren, that on the day of judgment we risk being classed among the

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unbelievers and will be chastised more severely even than those ignorant of Christ? Inevitably either we must be

chastised as unbelievers or Christ is a liar - and that, my brethren, is impossible.

I have written this not to dissuade you from withdrawing from the world or to encourage you to live in the midst

of it. Rather I have written it so that all who happen to read it may be assured that whoever wants to act rightly will

receive from God the power so to do, wherever he may be. In fact, the tale I have told actually encourages withdrawal. For if the young man in question, who lived in the world and never had a thought of renouncing it, or of

shedding his possessions, or of submitting to the rule of obedience, received such mercy from God simply because

he trusted in Him and called on Him with his whole soul, how much greater blessings should those hope to attain

who have abandoned all worldly things and all worldly relationships and who as God commanded have for His sake

surrendered their very souls to death (cf Luke 14:26)? Moreover, if, unhesitating in your faith and wholehearted in

your determination, you do begin to act rightly and to experience the blessing that comes from so doing, you will of

your own accord realize that worldly cares and living in the world are a great obstacle to those who wish to live in

conformity with God. What we have related about this young man is amazing and unexpected, and we have never

heard of anything like it happening to anyone else. Even though it may have happened to others or may happen in

the future, they should realize that they will lose the blessing they have received unless they do promptly abandon

the world. This is exactly what I learnt from that young man.

I subsequently met him after he had become a monk, in the third or fourth year of his monastic life. He was then

thirty -two. I knew him very well: we had been friends from childhood and had been brought up together.
On account

of this he also told me the following: 'A few days after that incredible change in my life and the more than human

help I received, I was continually attacked by the temptations of my worldly life - temptations that thwarted my

secret activities and that little by little deprived me of the blessings I had been given. As a result I longed to get

completely away from the world and in solitude to seek out Him who had appeared to me. For, brother, I was

convinced that He had appeared to me solely in order to draw me, unworthy as I was, to Himself and to separate me

entirely from the world. Yet lacking the strength to respond straight away I gradually forgot everything I have

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told you about and fell into utter darkness, to such an extent that I no longer remembered or even thought of

anything, major or minor, connected with those experiences. Rather, I plunged into evil ways more deeply than ever

before and ended up in such a state that it was as if I had never understood or heard Christ's holy words. Even the

saint who had once shown me such mercy and who had given me that short rule and had sent me that book became

for me merely someone I had happened to meet, and I gave no thought to the things I had seen because of him. I am

telling you this,' he continued, 'so you can see quite clearly the pit of perdition into which I fell, contemptible as I

was, because of my sloth and negligence, and so you will be filled with amazement at the inexpressible blessings

that God subsequently bestowed on me.

'For - though I do not know how to explain it - unknown to myself love and trust toward that saintly elder had

remained in my unhappy heart; and it was I think for this reason that, as a result of his prayers, after many years God

in His compassion had mercy on me. Through him God again dragged me out of my chronic state of delusion and

rescued me from the pit of evil. In spite of my unworthiness I had not completely broken with the elder, but when I

was in the city I often visited him in his cell and confessed to him what had happened to me, although, without

conscience as I was, I did not carry out any of his instructions. But now, as you see, the merciful God has forgiven

my many sins, and through that same saintly elder has granted me the grace to become a monk and - in spite of my

being truly unworthy of it - has permitted me to be constantly with him. After .great labors and many tears,

combined with strict solitude, total obedience, the complete elimination of my own will and many other rigorous

practices and actions, I have been going forward resolutely and unremittingly along my path, and have again been

granted a vision, faint as it is, of a small ray of that most gentle divine light, although up to now I have not been

privileged to see it as I saw it on that original occasion.'

This and many other things he told me with tears. And I, hapless that I am, as I listened to his holy words realized

that he was entirely filled with divine grace and was truly wise, despite his lack of worldly wisdom. Moreover, since

he had acquired his unerring knowledge of spiritual realities through actual experience, I asked him to tell me how

faith could bring about such miracles and to instruct me by setting it

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down in writing. He began to speak to me about these matters and was quite ready to write down his observations.

Not to lengthen this present text, I have set forth what he said elsewhere for the delight of those who seek with Faith

to learn from such writings.

Thus I beg you, brethren in Christ, let us also diligently follow the path of Christ's commandments, so that our

faces are not covered in shame (cf Ps. 34:5). To everyone who knocks resolutely He opens the gates of His

kingdom, and on him who asks He at once bestows the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 11:13). Nor is it possible for the person

who seeks with all his soul not to find (cf. Matt. 7:7-8) and not to be enriched with the richness of His gifts. Thus

you, too, will be nourished by the inexpressible blessings that He has prepared for those who love Him (cf. 1 Cor.

2:9). Here, in this present life, you will enjoy them in part, in accordance with His supernal wisdom; while in the life

to come you will enjoy them fully, in company with the saints of all time, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be

glory throughout the ages. Amen.

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1 . To have faith is to die for Christ and for His commandments; to believe that this death brings life; to regard

poverty as wealth, and lowliness and humiliation as true glory and honor; to believe that by not possessing anything

one possesses everything (cf. 2 Cor. 6:9-10) or, rather, that not possessing anything is to possess the 'unsearchable

riches' of the knowledge of Christ (Eph. 3:8); and to look upon all visible things as dross and smoke.

2. To have faith in Christ means not only to stand aloof from the delights of this life, but also to endure patiently

every temptation and test that brings upon us distress, affliction and misfortune, for as long as God wishes and until

He comes to us. 'I waited patiently for the Lord and He heard me' (Ps. 40: 1).

3. Those who in any way esteem their parents above the commandments of God do not possess faith in Christ (cf

Matt. 10:37). Their own conscience will certainly accuse them - if their conscience is still alive to their lack of faith.

People who possess faith never transgress at any point the commandment of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

4. Faith in God engenders desire, for spiritual blessings and fear of punishment. Desire for spiritual blessings and

fear of punishment induce a strict keeping of the commandments. The strict keeping of the commandments teaches

us our own weakness. Awareness of our true weakness generates mindfulness of death. The person who is mindful

of death will insistently strive to discover what awaits him after his exit from this present life. But he who seeks to

know what is to come should first of all detach himself from the things of this world; for whoever is constrained by

an attachment, however small, to these

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things cannot acquire full knowledge of his post-mortal state. Even should God in His mercy give him some taste of

this knowledge, it will be taken away from him unless he speedily severs his worldly attachments and dedicates

himself wholly to it, not willingly giving thought to anything extraneous to it.

5. The renunciation of and total separation from this world - which includes self-alienation from all material things, from the modes, attitudes and forms of this present life, as well as the denial of one's own body and will -

swiftly brings great rewards whenever it is zealously accomplished.

6. If you are intent on renouncing the world, do not permit yourself the solace of dwelling in it for the time being,

even if all your relatives and friends try to compel you to do so. It is the demons who provoke them in this way in

order to extinguish the ardor of your heart; for even if they cannot thwart your purpose completely, they will try to

slacken and enfeeble it.

7. When you are courageously impervious to all the pleasures of this life, then the demons will promote in your

relatives a spurious compassion for you, making them weep and lament over you before your eyes. You will realize

that it is spurious when you stick firmly to your purpose, for you will then see them becoming suddenly infuriated

with you: they will no longer want to set eyes on you and will reject you as if you were an enemy.

8. When you see the pain which your parents, relatives and friends experience because of you, mock the demon

who in his subtlety has provoked these feelings against you. Withdraw with fear and determination, and entreat God

insistently to bring you swiftly into His haven, where He will give rest to your tired and over-burdened soul. The sea

of life nourishes many forms of danger and even of utter destruction.

9. He who would hate the world must love God from the depths of his soul and always have Him in mind;

nothing else leads us to abandon the world more joyfully and to turn away from it as though it were so much trash.

10. Once called, do not seek to remain in the world for any reason at all, good or bad; obey the call straight away.

God rejoices at nothing so much as our promptitude; and swift obedience involving a life of frugality is better than

procrastination amidst great wealth.

11. If the world and everything in it passes away, while God alone is

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eternal and immortal, then rejoice, since for His sake you have renounced what is corruptible. Not merely wealth

and possessions, but every sensual pleasure and sinful enjoyment are corruptive. Only the commandments of God

are light and life, and everyone acknowledges them as such.

12. If, brother, consumed by spiritual ardor you have entered a monastery or placed yourself under a spiritual

father, do not indulge in baths, food or other bodily consolations, even if urged to do so by your spiritual father

himself or by your monastic brethren. On the contrary, always be ready to fast, to endure hardship, to exercise the

utmost self-control. If, however, your spiritual father insists that you should enjoy some comfort, you will obey him,

not even in such a case acting according to your own will. But if he does not insist, then gladly endure what you

have freely chosen to do, and your soul will benefit. By keeping to this rule, you will find that always, in every

situation, you are abstinent and self-controlled, prompt to renounce your own will in all things. Moreover, you will

keep alight in your heart that flame which constrains you to stand aloof from everything.

13. When the demons have done all they can to shake our resolve to live a spiritual life and to hinder us from

carrying it out, and have failed in their efforts, they enter pious hypocrites and through them try to obstruct us. First,

as if moved by love and compassion, they exhort us to give our bodies some relaxation, on the grounds that

otherwise we will become physically exhausted and listless. Then they invite us to join in useless discussions,

making us waste whole days in them. If we pay attention to these hypocrites and model ourselves on them, the

demons change tactics, mocking us for falling in this way; but if we take no notice of their suggestions, and hold

ourselves aloof from all, recollected and reserved, they are consumed with jealousy and do everything they can until

they have driven us from the monastery. Arrogance cannot bear to see itself scorned and humility held in honor.

14. A man full of self-esteem suffers torture when he sees a humble person weeping and being doubly compensated: by God, who is moved to pity because of his tears, and by men, who are moved to give him praise that

he never sought.

15. Once you have entrusted yourself wholly to your spiritual father, you will find yourself alienated from all things human, worldly or material, that might lead you astray. Without his consent you will

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not have any desire to concern yourself with such things; nor will you ask him to allow you anything, great or small,

unless he himself on his own initiative either tells you to take it or gives it to you with his own hands.

16. Without the permission of your spiritual father, do not give alms from the money you brought with you, and

do not even allow an agent acting on your behalf to distribute any of your wealth. It is better for others to regard you

as poor and destitute than to distribute your wealth to those in need while you are still a novice. A person of pure

faith will entrust everything to the decision of his spiritual father as if putting it into the hands of God.

17. Even if you are burning with thirst, do not ask for a drink of water until on his own initiative your spiritual

father urges you to drink. Constrain yourself, force yourself in all things, prevail over yourself, saying to yourself: 'If

God wills. ..." And if you deserve a drink, God will certainly reveal this to your spiritual father and he will say to

you, 'Drink.' Thus you will drink with a pure conscience, even if it is not the correct moment to do so.

18. Someone with experience of spiritual grace and possessing an unadulterated faith once said, invoking God as

witness of its truth: 'I resolved never to ask for anything to eat or drink from my spiritual father, or to take anything

at all without his consent, but to wait until God prompted him to give me an order. Acting in this way, I never

deviated from my aim.'

19. Whoever possesses unclouded faith in his spiritual father will, on seeing him, think that he is seeing Christ

Himself; when with him or following him, he will firmly believe that he is with and following Christ. Such a person

will never want to associate with anyone else, nor will he value anything in the world more than his thought of him

and his love for him. For what is finer or more profitable in this world or in the next than to be with Christ? What is

more gracious or beautiful than the sight of Him? If someone is privileged to enjoy His companionship, he draws

from this eternal life.

20. If you truly love and pray for those who slander and maltreat you, who hate and defraud you, you will make

rapid progress, for when your heart is fully aware that this is happening, your thoughts and, indeed, your whole soul

with all its three powers are drawn down into the depths of humility and washed with tears. This in its turn raises

your intellect to the heaven of dispassion, conferring on it the

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gift of contemplation. Because you have tasted such blessing, you come to regard all the things in this life as mere

dross, so that you do not even take food or drink with pleasure or any frequency.

21 . The spiritual contestant must not only abstain from evil actions, but must also strive to be free from hostile

thoughts and notions. He should always concentrate on ideas of a soul-nourishing and spiritual nature, thus

remaining detached from worldly cares.

22. A person who strips his whole body bare, but keeps his eyes covered with a cloth, cannot see the light despite

his nakedness. Similarly a person detached from all things, including possessions, and even delivered from the

passions themselves, will never see the spiritual light - our Lord and God, Jesus Christ - until he frees his soul's eye

from worldly concerns and evil thoughts.

23. Worldly thoughts and material concerns blind the mind, or eye of the soul, like a cloth that covers the physical

eyes: so long as we are not free of them, we cannot see. But once they are removed by mindfulness of death, then we

clearly see the true light, that which illumines everyone who attains the spiritual world.

24. The person blind from birth will not recognize or believe the significance of what I have just written; but the

person privileged with sight will bear witness that what I have said is true.

25. The person who sees with physical eyes knows when it is night and when it is day; the blind man is unaware

of both. The person who has come to see with the eyes of the spirit, and who has beheld the true and quenchless

light, is consciously aware when he is deprived of it should he return, out of laziness, to his former blindness; and he

will not be ignorant of why this has happened. But the person blind from birth, and remaining so, knows nothing of

these things from personal experience of their operation. He knows about them only from hearsay, but has never

actually seen them; and if he tells others what he has heard, neither he nor his audience will know what he is talking

about.

26. We cannot both sate ourselves with food and spiritually enjoy divine and noumenal blessings; the more we

pander to the stomach the less can we experience such enjoyment. But to the degree that we discipline the body we

are filled with spiritual nourishment and grace.

27. We should abandon all that is earthly. We should not only renounce riches and gold and other material things,

but should also expel desire for such things completely from our soul We should hate

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not only the body's sensual pleasure, but also its mindless impulses;

and we should strive to mortify it through suffering. For it is through the body that our desires are roused and stirred

into action; and so long as it is alive, our soul will inevitably be dead, slow to respond and even impervious to every

divine command.

28. Just as a flame always rises no matter in what direction one turns the wood on which it burns, so the heart of

an arrogant person cannot humble itself; the more one says to help him, the greater his self-inflation. Corrected or

admonished, he reacts violently; and when praised or encouraged, his exultation knows no bounds.

29. A person in the habit of contradicting others becomes a two-edged sword to himself. Unwittingly he destroys

his own soul and alienates it from eternal life.

30. A contentious person is like someone who deliberately gives himself over to the enemies of his king.

Contentiousness is a trap whose bait is self-justification; deceived by it we swallow the hook of sin. Then our

unhappy soul is caught, tongue and 'throat, by the demons. Sometimes they exalt it to the heights of pride and

sometimes cast it down into the depths of sin, to be judged with those who have fallen from heaven.

31 . A person who suffers bitterly when slighted or insulted should recognize from this that he still harbors the

ancient serpent in his breast. If he quietly endures the insult or responds with great humility, he weakens the serpent

and lessens its hold. But if he replies acrimoniously or brazenly, he gives it strength to pour its venom into his heart

and to feed mercilessly on his guts. In this way the serpent becomes increasingly powerful; it destroys his soul's

strength and his attempts to set himself right, compelling him to live for sin and to be completely dead to righteousness.

32. If you want to renounce the world and to be instructed in life according to the Gospels, do not place yourself

in the hands of an inexperienced master or one subject to the passions; for then you will be taught, not the ways of

the Gospels, but those of the devil. Good masters impart good teaching, but the evil teach evil. Bad seed produces

rotten fruit.

33. Implore God with prayers and tears to send you a guide who is dispassionate and holy. But you yourself

should also study the divine writings - especially the works of the fathers that deal with the practice of the virtues -

so that you can compare the teachings of your

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master with them; for thus you will see and observe them as in a mirror. Take to heart and keep in mind those of his

teachings that agree with the divine writings, but separate out and reject those that are false and incongruent.

Otherwise you will be led astray. For in these days there are all too many deceivers and false prophets.

34. A blind person who undertakes to guide others is a deceiver plunging into the pit of destruction those who

follow him. As the Lord said: 'If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the pit' (Matt. 15:14).

35. The person blind to the One is utterly blind to everything; but he who sees in the One contemplates all things.

He abstains from the contemplation of all things and at the same time enters into the contemplation of all things

while remaining outside what he contemplates. Being .in the One he sees all things; and being in all things he sees

nothing. The person who sees in the One perceives through the One both himself and all men and all things; hidden

in the One, he sees nothing of anything.

36. The person who has not consciously invested his intelligence and intellect with the image of our Lord Jesus

Christ, the heavenly one, man and God, is still but flesh and blood. He cannot perceive spiritual glory solely through

his intelligence, just as those blind from birth cannot know the sun's light solely through their intelligence.

37. Whoever hears, sees and feels through his intelligence will know the meaning of what has just been said,

because he already bears the image of the heavenly one (cf 1 Cor. 15:49) and has attained that perfect manhood

which is the fullness of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13). Such a person can also guide God's flock aright in the way of His

commandments. But if someone does not understand what has been said, it is clear that the perceptive organs of his

soul are neither purified nor in good health, and that it would be better for him to be led than to lead others at their

peril.

38. He who looks upon his teacher and guide as if he were God cannot call him into question. If he thinks and

says that he can, he should know that he deceives himself, being ignorant of the attitude of holy men towards God.

39. If you believe that your life and death are in the hands of your spiritual guide you will never contradict him.

Ignorance of this engenders contentiousness, and this brings about spiritual and eternal death.

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40. Before the accused receives his sentence, he is given an opportunity to speak in his own defense before the

judge about what he has done; but once the facts have been established and the judge has given his verdict, the

accused can say nothing, whether important or trivial, to those who execute his punishment.

41 . Before a monk has entered this court and has revealed what he has in his heart, he may perhaps argue with his

spiritual guide, either out of ignorance or because he thinks he can keep things about himself hidden. But after he

has revealed and sincerely confessed his thoughts, he cannot argue with the man who, after God, will be his judge

and master until death. For when a monk has once entered this court and laid bare the secrets of his heart, he will

know from the start - if he has any understanding at all - that he deserves a thousand deaths. He will believe that

through humility and obedience he can be saved from all punishment and chastisement, if indeed he has truly

grasped the nature of this mystery.

42. If you keep these things indelibly in mind, your heart will never rebel when you are disciplined or

admonished or criticized. But whoever falls victim to the evils of contentiousness and disbelief with respect to his

spiritual father and teacher is while yet living dragged down pitifully into the depths of Hades. Being disobedient

and a son of perdition he becomes the dwelling-place of Satan and all his unclean brood.

43. I exhort you, who are under obedience, to meditate on these things constantly and to make every effort not to

plunge into these infernal evils of which I have spoken. Entreat God fervently each day with these words: 'God and

Lord of all, master of everything that has breath and soul, who alone canst cure me, hear my prayer, abject as I am.

Root out of me and destroy through the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit the serpent that dwells in me. Make me

worthy, poor though I am and bereft of virtue, of falling with tears at the feet of my spiritual father. Move his holy

soul to have mercy on me; and. Lord, bestow humility on my heart and give me such thoughts as befit a sinner who

has resolved to repent before Thee. Do not abandon for ever a soul that has once submitted and has confessed to

Thee, that has chosen and honored Thee above all me world. Thou knowest that I wish to be saved, even if my bad

habits hinder me. But to Thee, Lord, are possible all things that are impossible to men' (cf Luke 18:27).

44. Those who with fear and trembling have laid a good foundation

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of faith and hope in the court of devotion; who have planted their feet firmly on the rock of obedience to their

spiritual father; who listen to his counsel as if it came from the mouth of God; and who with humility of soul build

all this on the basis of obedience - such people will succeed immediately. They will achieve that great and primary

task of denying themselves. For to fulfill the will of another and not one's own entails not only the denial of one's

own soul, but also mortification towards the whole world.

45. The demons rejoice when a person argues with his spiritual father, but angels marvel at him when he humbles

himself to the point of death. For then he performs God's work, making himself like the Son of God who was

obedient to His Father unto death, the death on the cross (cf Phil. 2:8).

46. Contrition of heart, when excessive and untimely, troubles and darkens the mind, destroying the soul's

humility and pure prayer, and paining the heart. This induces a hardening to the point of total insensibility; and by

means of this the demons reduce spiritual people to despair.

47. As you are a monk, such things may happen to you. If they do, you may still feel a great desire and eagerness

for perfection, longing to fulfill all God's commandments and not wanting to err or sin even by uttering a single idle

word (cf. Matt. 12:36), or to fall short of the saints of old in the practice of virtue, in spiritual knowledge and in

contemplation. But then you may find yourself hampered by someone who sows tares of despondency. He tries to

prevent you from climbing to such heights of holiness by discouraging you with various thoughts. For instance, he

will tell you that it is impossible for you to be saved and to keep every single one of God's commandments while

you live in this world. When this happens you should sit down in a solitary place by yourself, collect yourself,

concentrate your thoughts and give good counsel to your soul, saying: 'Why, my soul, are you dejected, and why do

you trouble me? Put your hope in God. for I will give thanks to Him; for my salvation lies not in my actions but in

God (cf Ps. 42:5). Who will be vindicated by actions done according to the law (cf Gal. 2:16)? No living person

will be vindicated before God (cf. Ps. 143:2). Yet by virtue of my faith in God I hope that in His ineffable mercy He

will give me salvation. Get behind me, Satan (cf. Matt. 4:10; 16:23). I worship the Lord my God (cf. Matt. 4:10;

Luke 4:8) and serve Him from my youth; for He is able to save me simply

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through His mercy. Go away from me. The God who created me in His image and likeness will reduce you to

impotence.'

48. The only thing God requires of us is that we do not sin. But this is achieved, not by acting according to the

law, but by carefully guarding the divine image in us and our supernal dignity. When we thus live in our natural

state, wearing the resplendent robe of the Spirit, we dwell in God and God dwells in us. Then we are called gods by

adoption and sons of God, sealed by the light of the knowledge of God (cf Ps. 4:6. LXX).

49. Bodily listlessness and torpor, which affect the soul as a result of our laziness and negligence, not only make

us abandon our normal rule of prayer, but also darken the mind and fill it with despondency. Then blasphemous and

cowardly thoughts arise in the heart. Indeed, the person tempted by the demon of listlessness cannot even enter his

usual place of prayer; he grows sluggish, and absurd thoughts directed against the Creator of all things arise in his

mind. Aware of the cause of all this and why it has happened to you, resolutely enter your normal place of prayer

and, falling down before the God of love, ask with a compunctive and aching heart, full of tears, to be freed from the

weight of listlessness and from your pernicious thoughts. If you knock hard and insistently, this release will soon be

given to you.

50. The person who has attained purity of heart has triumphed over cowardice. The person still in the process of

being purified sometimes overcomes it and sometimes is overcome by it. The person not even engaged in spiritual

warfare is either completely unaware that he is the ally of his own passions and of the demons and that he is sick

with pride and presumption, thinking he is something when he is not; or else he is the slave and servant of

cowardice, trembling like a baby and fearing fear where, for those who fear the Lord, there is no fear (cf Ps. 14:5.

LXX) nor any occasion for cowardice.

5 1 . Whoever fears the Lord will not fear the sickly attacks of demons or the threats of evil people. Like a flame or

a burning fire, he goes about day and night through dark and hidden places, and instead of fleeing from the demons

he makes them flee from him, so as not to be scorched by the flaming rays of divine fire that pour from him.

52. Whoever goes in the fear of God is not afraid when surrounded by evil men, for he has the fear of God within

him and wears the invincible armour of faith. This gives him strength to do all things, even those that seem to most

people difficult or impossible. Like a giant

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among monkeys or a roaring lion among dogs and foxes, he is resolute in the Lord, unnerving his enemies with the

constancy of his purpose and filling their minds with terror; for he wields God's wisdom like a rod of iron (cf. Ps.

2:9).

53. Not only the hesychast, living alone, or the monk under obedience, but also the abbot, the spiritual director of

many, and even a monk charged with specific duties, need to be detached and completely free from all worldly

cares. For if we are not detached, we transgress the commandment of God which says, 'Do not be anxious about

your life, what you will eat or drink, or what you will wear; for it is the heathen who worry about all these things'

(Matt. 6:25, 32). And again, 'Take care that your heart is not weighed down by dissipation, drunkenness and worldly

cares' (Luke 21:34).

54. A person full of anxiety about worldly things is not free: he is dominated and enslaved by this anxiety, whether it is about himself or about others. But he who is free from such things is untroubled by worldly concerns,

whether they relate to himself or to others; and this is so, even if he is a bishop, abbot or priest. However, he will not

be idle, or neglect even the most insignificant and trivial details; but all he does he will do for the glory of God,

accomplishing everything in his life without anxiety.

55. Do not pull down your own house because you want to build a house for your neighbor. Think how exhausting and difficult the task will be. Otherwise you may make your decision only to find that, having destroyed

your own house, you lack the strength to build a house for someone else.

56. Unless you are completely detached from worldly affairs and possessions, do not voluntarily assume responsibility for such things. Otherwise you may become caught up in them and, instead of receiving the reward for

your services, may find yourself accused of theft and sacrilege. But if your abbot compels you to act as a steward, be

like someone who holds in his hands a flaming fire; and if you ward off the attacks of your own evil thoughts

through repentance and confession, you will be kept unharmed through the prayers of your superior.

57. Unless you have become dispassionate you cannot know what dispassion is, and will not believe that a

dispassionate person exists anywhere on earth. For unless someone has first denied himself, readily giving his blood

for the sake of a life that is truly blessed, how

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can he imagine that anyone else has done this in order to attain the state of dispassion? It is the same with someone

who thinks that he possesses the Holy Spirit while in fact he possesses nothing of the kind. When he hears about the

workings of the Spirit in those who do possess Him, he refuses to believe that there is anyone in our generation who

is energized and motivated by the Holy Spirit, or who consciously and experientially enjoys the vision of Him, in the

same way as Christ's apostles and the saints from the beginning of the world. For each judges whether his neighbor's

condition is virtuous or vicious according to his own state.

58. A dispassionate soul is one thing, a dispassionate body is another. For the soul, when dispassionate, sanctifies

the body with its own luminosity and with the radiance of the Holy Spirit. But bodily dispassion by itself confers no

benefit on the person who possesses it.

59. A person who is raised by the king from extreme poverty to wealth, who is invested by him with high office

and a splendid uniform and commanded to stand in his presence, will be full of devotion for the king and will revere

him as his benefactor. He will be fully aware of his splendid robes, of his high office and the wealth he has been

given. Similarly, if a monk has truly withdrawn from the world and its affairs and has come to Christ, if he is fully

conscious of his calling and has been raised to the heights of spiritual contemplation through the practice of the

commandments, then he will look unwaveringly on God and be well aware of the change that has taken place in

him. He will see the grace of the Spirit always illuminating him - the grace that is called a garment, the royal purple

or, rather, that is Christ Himself, if it is indeed true that those who believe in Christ are clothed in Christ (cf Gal.

3:27).

60. Many read the Holy Scriptures and hear them read. But few can grasp their meaning and import. For some

what is said in the Scriptures is impossible, for others it is altogether beyond belief. Some again interpret them

wrongly: they apply things said about the present to the future, and things said about the future to the past or else to

what happens daily. In this way they reveal a lack of true judgment and discernment in things both human and

divine.

61. We, the faithful, should look upon all the faithful as one single being, and should consider that Christ dwells

in each of them. We should have such love for each of them that we are willing to lay down our lives for him. Nor

should we ever think or say that anyone is evil:

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we should look on everyone as good, as I have already said. Even should you see someone overwhelmed by some

passion, execrate, not him, but the passions that fight against him. And if he is mastered by desires and

prepossessions, have even greater compassion for him; for you too may be tempted, subject as you are to the same

fluctuations of beguiling materiality.

62. A person false through hypocrisy, or culpable because of his actions, or easily shattered by some passion, or

who lapses slightly through negligence, must not be left in the company of those who are working together in

harmony. On the contrary he must be excluded from their society as still corrupt and reprobate. Otherwise at some

crucial moment he might break their chain of union, causing division where there should be none and distress both

to those who are at the head of the chain - for they will be grieved for those who follow after them - and to those at

the tail of the chain, who will suffer because they are cut off from those in front of them.

63. Earth thrown on a fire puts it out. Similarly, worldly concerns and attachment to even the smallest and most

insignificant thing quell the fervor initially burning in our hearts.

64. If you are pregnant with the fear of death you will feel disgust for all food and drink and smart clothing. You

will not even find pleasure in eating bread or drinking water. You will give your body only what it needs to keep

alive; and you will not only renounce all self-will, but at the discretion of those to whom you are obedient you will

become the servant of all.

65. The person who from fear of punishment hereafter has placed himself as a slave in the hands of his spiritual

fathers will not choose, even if commanded to do so, relief for his heart's suffering or deliverance from the bonds of

his fear. Nor will he listen to those who out of friendship, or flattery, or in virtue of their authority, encourage him to

seek such relief and freedom. On the contrary, he will choose what increases his suffering and heightens his fear,

and will look with love on whatever helps another to inflict these things on him. Moreover, he will endure as though

he never expected to be released; for hope of deliverance lightens one's burden, and this is harmful for someone who

is repenting fervently.

66. Fear of punishment hereafter and the suffering it engenders are beneficial to all who are starting out on the

spiritual way. Whoever imagines that he can make a start without such suffering and fear, and

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without someone to inflict them, is not merely basing his actions on sand but thinks that he can build in the air

without any foundations at all; and this of course is utterly impossible, indeed, the suffering is the source of nearly

all our joy, while the fear breaks the grip of all our sins and passions, and the one who inflicts these things brings us

not death but eternal life.

67. He who does not attempt to evade the suffering engendered by the fear of eternal punishment, but accepts it

wholeheartedly, and even adds to it as he can, will rapidly advance into the presence of the King of kings.
And as

soon as he has beheld the glory of God, however obscurely, his bonds will be loosed: fear, his tormenter,
will leave

him, and his heart's suffering will be turned to joy. It will become a spring from which unceasing tears will
flow

visibly and which will fill him spiritually with peace, gentleness and inexpressible sweetness, as well as
with

courage and the capacity to submit to God's commandments freely and unreservedly. This is something
impossible

for those who are still- beginners, for it is the characteristic of such as are in the middle of their spiritual
journey. As

for the perfect, this spring becomes a light within their hearts, suddenly changed and transformed as they
are.

68. The person inwardly illumined by the light of the Holy Spirit cannot endure the vision of it, but falls face
down on the earth and cries out in great fear and amazement, since he has seen and experienced
something that is

beyond nature, thought or conception. He becomes like someone suddenly inflamed with a violent fever:
as though

on fire and unable to endure the flames, he is beside himself, utterly incapable of controlling himself. And
though he

pours forth incessant tears that bring him some relief, the flame of his desire kindles all the more. Then his
tears

flow yet more copiously and, washed by their flow, he becomes even more radiant. When, totally
incandescent, he

has become like light, then the saying is fulfilled, 'God is united with gods and known by them', in the
sense perhaps

that He is now united to those who have joined themselves to Him, and revealed to those who have come
to know

Him.

69. 'Let no one deceive you with vain words' (Eph. 5:6), and let us not deceive ourselves: before we have
experienced inward grief and

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tears there is no true repentance or change of mind in us, nor is there any fear of God in our hearts, nor have we

passed sentence on ourselves, nor has our soul become conscious of the coming judgment and eternal torments. Had

we accused ourselves and realized these things in ourselves, we would have immediately shed tears; for without

tears our hardened hearts cannot be mollified, our souls cannot acquire spiritual humility, and we cannot be humble.

If we do not attain such a state we cannot be united with the Holy Spirit. And if we have not been united with the

Holy Spirit through purification, we cannot have either vision or knowledge of God, or be initiated into the hidden

virtues of humility.

70. Those who simulate virtue and who, because of the sheepskin of the monastic habit, appear to be one thing

outwardly but are something else inwardly - steeped perhaps in iniquity, jealousy, ambition, and foul pleasures - are

revered by most people as saintly and dispassionate; for in most people the soul's eye is unpurified, and so they

cannot recognize these impostors by their fruits (cf Matt. 7:15-16). Those, on the other hand, who are full of

devoutness, virtue and simplicity of heart, and who are truly saints, are judged by most people to be like other men;

and they pass them by with disdain, counting them as nothing.

71. The garrulous and ostentatious man is thought by these people to be a spiritual master; but the quiet man,

careful not to waste words, they regard as uncouth and inarticulate.

72. The arrogant, sick with diabolic pride, reject anyone inspired by the Holy Spirit as if this saintly man were

himself arrogant and filled with pride; for his words strike them like blows, yet do not move them to compunction.

But whoever uses his inborn talents or education to spin long phrases, and who tells lies to people about their

salvation, is welcomed by them and praised to the skies; and so no one among them is able to see the situation as it

is and judge it accordingly.

73. 'Blessed are the pure in heart,' says God, 'for they shall see God' (Matt. 5:8). But purity of heart cannot be

realized through one virtue alone, or through two, or ten; it can only be realized through all of them together, as if

they formed but a single virtue brought to perfection. Even so the virtues cannot by themselves purify the heart

without the presence and inner working of the Spirit. For just as the bronzesmith demonstrates his skill through his

tools, but cannot make anything without the activity of fire, so a man using the virtues as tools

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can do everything, given the presence of the fire of the Spirit; but without this presence these tools remain useless

and ineffective, not removing the stain that befouls the soul.

74. Through holy baptism we are granted remission of our sins, are freed from the ancient curse, and are sanctified by the presence of the Holy Spirit. But we do not as yet receive the perfection of grace, as described in the

words of Scripture, 'I will dwell in them, and move in them' (2 Cor. 6:16); for that is true only of those who are

steadfast in faith and have demonstrated this through what they do. If after we have been baptized we gravitate

towards evil and foul actions, we lose the sanctification of baptism completely. But through repentance, confession

and tears we receive a corresponding remission of our former sins and, in this way, sanctification accompanied by

the grace of God.

75. Through repentance the filth of our foul actions is washed away. After this, we participate in the Holy Spirit,

not automatically, but according to the faith, humility and inner disposition of the repentance in which our whole

soul is engaged. In addition, we must also have received complete remission of our sins from our spiritual father.

For this reason it is good to repent each day, in accordance with the commandment that tells us to do this; for the

words, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near' (Matt. 3:2), indicate that the act of repentance is

unending.

76. The grace of the Holy Spirit is given as a pledge to souls that are betrothed to Christ; and just as without a

pledge a woman cannot be sure that her union with her man will take place, so the soul will have no firm assurance

that it will be joined for all eternity with its Lord and God, or be united with Him mystically and inexpressibly, or

enjoy His unapproachable beauty, unless it receives the pledge of His grace and consciously possesses Him within

Itself

77. Just as an engagement is not binding unless the documents of the contract bear the signatures of trustworthy

witnesses, so the illumination of grace is dependent upon the practice of the commandments and the actualization of

the virtues. What witnesses are to a contract, the virtues and the practice of the commandments are to spiritual

betrothal: through them everyone who is going to be saved secures the consummation of the pledge.

78. It is as if the contract were written through the practice of the commandments and then signed and sealed by

the virtues. Only then

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