

Step 14 on the Clamorous , Yet Wicked Master-the Stomach.

by St. John Climacus

To overcome gluttony, one must master their stomach and deny themselves fattening foods, leading to a life of purity and chastity.

Scripture: Proverbs 23:20, Ecclesiastes 6:7, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Galatians 5:16, Philippians 3:19

Topics: "Spiritual Discipline", "Christian Temperance"

Description

St. John Climacus delivers a sermon on the dangers of gluttony, highlighting how it leads to hypocrisy, excess, and a lack of self-control. He emphasizes the importance of mortifying the stomach to achieve purity and spiritual enrichment, contrasting the monk's focus on food with the servant of God's pursuit of grace. St. John warns against the temptations of the stomach, urging believers to master their desires and practice temperance to avoid falling into the traps of gluttony and fornication.

Transcript

1. We have been attacking ourselves in everything that we have said, but this is specially so when we speak about the stomach. For I wonder if anyone has got free of this master before settling in the grave.
2. Gluttony is hypocrisy of the stomach; for when it is gluttoned it complains of scarcity, and when it is loaded and bursting it cries out that it is hungry.
3. Gluttony is a deviser of seasonings, a source of sweet dishes. You stop one jet, and it bobs up elsewhere; you plug this too, and you open another.
4. Gluttony is a delusion of the eyes which receives in moderation but wants to gobble everything at once.
5. Satiety in food is the father of fornication; but mortification of the stomach is an agent of purity.
6. He who fondles a lion often tames it, but he who coddles the body makes it still wilder.
7. The Jew rejoices on Sabbaths and feast days; and a monk who is a glutton on Saturdays and Sundays. He counts beforehand the days till Easter, and he prepares the food for it several days in advance. The slave of his belly calculates with what dishes he will celebrate the feast, but the servant of God considers with what graces he may be enriched.

8. If a stranger comes, the slave of the stomach is moved to love entirely from gluttony, and he regards laxity for himself as consolation for his brother. When others are present, he deems it right to allow himself wine; and thinking to hide his virtue, he becomes a slave of passion.

2 The title varies slightly in different texts.

9. Often vanity proves an enemy of gluttony, and they quarrel between themselves for the wretched monk as for a purchased slave. The one urges him to relax, while the other proposes that he should make his virtue triumph. The wise monk will shun both, at the right time shaking off each passion by the other.

10. As long as the flesh is still lusty, let us observe temperance at all times and in every place. When it has been pacified (which I do not suppose is possible this side of the grave), then let us hide our accomplishment.

11. I have seen aged priests bewitched by the demons; and on the feasts they gave their blessing to young men not under their direction to use wine and all the rest. If those who give permission have a good witness in the Lord (i.e. are spiritual), then let us also permit ourselves within limits. But if they are negligent, let us not give a thought to their blessing, especially when we are in the actual heat of the struggle with our flesh.

12. Evagrius,¹ afflicted by an evil spirit, imagined himself to be the wisest of the wise both in thought and expression. But he was deceived, poor man, and proved to be the most foolish of fools in this among other things. For he says: 'When our soul desires different foods, then confine it to bread and water.' To prescribe this is like saying to a child: 'Go up the whole ladder in one stride.' And so, rejecting his rule, let us say: When our soul desires different foods, it is demanding what is proper to its nature. Therefore, let us also use cunning against our unscrupulous foe. And unless a very severe conflict is on us, or amends for falls, let us for a while only deny ourselves fattening foods, then heating foods, and only then what makes our food pleasant. If possible, give your stomach satisfying and digestible food, so as to satisfy its insatiable hunger by sufficiency, and so that we may be delivered from excessive desire, as from a scourge, by quick assimilation. If we look into the matter, we shall find that most of the foods which inflate the stomach also excite the body.

13. Laugh at the demon who, after supper, suggests that you should take your meal later in future; for the next day at the ninth hour he will change the arrangements of the previous day.

14. One kind of temperance is suitable for those who behave irreproachably, and another for those subject to weaknesses. For the former, a movement in the body is a signal for restraint; but the latter are affected by such movements without relief or relaxation till their very death and end. The former always wish to preserve peace of mind, and the latter propitiate God by spiritual lamentation and contrition.

15. The perfect find their time of gladness and consolation in the attainment of dispassion in all things; the warrior-ascetic enjoys the heat of the battle; but the slave of the passions revels in the Feast of feasts and the Triumph of triumphs.²

16. The heart of gluttons dreams only of food and eatables, but the heart of those who weep dreams of judgment and castigation.

17. Master your stomach before it masters you; and then you are sure to control yourself with the aid of shame. Those who have fallen into the horrible gulf know what I have said; but men who are eunuchs

have not experienced this.

18. Let us prune the stomach by thought of the future fire. For some who were servants of their stomach have cut their members right off, and died a double death. If we go into the matter, we shall find that it is the stomach alone that is the cause of all human shipwreck.

1 The fourth century Evagrius of Pontus was a follower of Origen and was condemned with him in the 5th Ecumenical Council in 553.

2 In the Orthodox Church the Paschal Festival or Easter is known as the Feast of feasts and Triumph of triumphs. It is preceded by a fast of forty-nine days inclusive of Passion Week. There is no fasting in Easter Week, hence the glutton rejoices.

19. The mind of a faster prays soberly, but the mind of an intemperate person is filled with impure idols.¹

20. Satiety of the stomach dries the tear springs, but the stomach when dried produces these waters.

21. He who cherishes his stomach and hopes to overcome the spirit of fornication, is like one who tries to put out a fire with oil.

22. By stinting the stomach the heart is humbled, but by pleasing the stomach the mind becomes proud.

23. Keep watch over yourself early in the morning, at midday, and for an hour before taking food, and you will realize the value of fasting. In the morning, thought leaps and runs from one thing to another. With the approach of the sixth hour of the day it becomes somewhat quieter; and by sunset it is completely at peace.

24. Stint your stomach and you will certainly lock your mouth, because the tongue is strengthened by a lot of food. Struggle with all your might against the stomach and restrain it with all sobriety. If you labour a little, the Lord also will soon work with you.

25. Leather bottles get greater capacity if they are supple, but if they are left in neglect they do not hold so much. He who burdens his stomach with food, distends his inside; but he who wars with his stomach contracts it. And when the inside is contracted, then we cannot take much, and for the future we become fasters naturally.

26. Thirst is often stopped by thirst; but it is difficult to cut off hunger by hunger, and even impossible. When the stomach overcomes you, tame it by labours. And if this is impossible owing to weakness, struggle with it by vigil. If the eyes become heavy, take up manual labour; but if sleep is not upon you, do not touch manual labour, because it is impossible to occupy the mind with God and Mammon, that is, both with God and manual labour.

27. Know that often a devil settles in the belly and does not let the man be satisfied even though he has devoured a whole Egypt and drunk a river Nile. But after taking food this unclean spirit goes away, and sends against us the spirit of fornication, telling him of our condition and saying: 'Catch, catch, hound him; for when the stomach is full, he will not resist much.' With a smile the spirit of fornication comes, and having bound us hand and foot by sleep, does with us all he pleases, defiling soul and body with its impurities, dreams, and emissions.

28. It is amazing to see the bodiless mind defiled and darkened by the body, and likewise the immaterial spirit purified and refined through clay.

29. If you have promised Christ to go by the strait and narrow way, restrain your stomach, because by pleasing it and enlarging it, you break your contract. Attend and you will hear Him who says: 'Spacious and broad is the way of gluttony that leads to the perdition of fornication, and many there are who go in by it; because narrow is the gate and hard is the way of fasting that leads to the life of purity, and few there are who go in by it.'²

30. The prince of demons is the fallen Lucifer, and the prince of passions is gluttony.

31. When sitting at a table laden with food, remember death and judgment, for even so you will only check the passion slightly. In taking drink, do not cease to imagine the vinegar and gall of your Lord. And you will certainly either be temperate, or you will sigh and humble your mind.

32. Do not be deceived: you will not be delivered from Pharaoh, and you will not see the heavenly Passover, unless you continually eat bitter herbs and unleavened bread. And bitter herbs--this is the coercion and pain of fasting; and unleavened bread--this is a mind that is not puffed up. Let this be

1 Or 'images'. Gk. eidōla

2 St. Matthew vii, 13--14.

knit to your breathing, the word of him who says: 'But I, when demons troubled me, put on sackcloth, and humbled my soul with fasting, and my prayer stuck to the bosom of my soul.'¹

33. Fasting is the coercion of nature and the cutting out of everything that delights the palate, the prevention of lust, the uprooting of bad thoughts, deliverance from dreams, purity of prayer, the light of the soul, the guarding of the mind, deliverance from blindness, the door of compunction, humble sighing, glad contrition, a lull in chatter, a means to silence, a guard of obedience, lightening of sleep, health of body, agent of dispassion, remission of sins, the gate of Paradise and its delight.

34. Let us ask this foe, or rather this supreme chief of our misfortunes, this door of passions, this fall of Adam, this ruin of Esau, this destruction of the Israelites, this laying naked of Noah's shame, this betrayer of Gomorrah, this reproach of Lot, this death of the sons of Eli, this guide to impurity--let us ask him: From whom is he born? Who are his offspring? Who crushes him? And who finally destroys him?

35. 'Tell us, tormentor of all mortals, who has bought all with the gold of greed: How did you get access to us? And what do you usually produce after your coming? And what is the manner of your departure from us?'

36. And gluttony, annoyed by these insults, raving with fury against us and foaming, replies: 'Why are you who are my underlings overwhelming me with reproaches? How are you trying to get separated from me? I am bound to you by nature. The door for me is the nature of foods. The cause of my insatiability is habit. The foundation of my passion is repeated habit, insensibility of soul and forgetfulness of death. How do you seek to learn the names of my offspring? If I count them, they will be more in number than the sand. But learn at least the names of my first born and beloved children. My first-born son is a minister of fornication, the second after him is hardness of heart, and the third is sleepiness. From me proceed a sea of bad thoughts, waves of filth, depths of unknown and unnamed impurities. My daughters are laziness,

talkativeness, familiarity in speech, jesting, facetiousness, contradiction, a stiff neck, obstinacy, disobedience, insensibility, captivity, conceit, audacity, boasting, after which follows impure prayer, whirling of thoughts, and often unexpected and sudden misfortunes, with which is closely bound despair, the most evil of all my daughters. The remembrance of falls resists me but does not conquer me. The thought of death is always hostile to me, but there is nothing among men that destroys me completely. He who has received the Comforter prays to Him against me; and the Comforter, when appealed to, does not allow me to act passionately. But those who have not tasted His gift inevitably seek their pleasure in my sweetness.'

The victory (over this vice) is a courageous one. He who is able, let him hasten to dispassion and to the highest degree of chastity.

1 Psalm xxxiv, 13.

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