

Step 22 on the Many Forms of Vainglory

by St. John Climacus

St. John Climacus explores the nature of vainglory, its dangers, and the path to overcoming it through humility and sincere intentions.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:18, Proverbs 27:2, Matthew 6:1, Romans 12:3, Galatians 6:3, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 3:23, James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Humility"

Description

St. John Climacus preaches about the dangers of vainglory, highlighting how it leads to pride and the importance of conquering it to avoid falling into the trap of seeking praise from others. He emphasizes the need for humility, the perils of seeking earthly glory, and the deceptive nature of vainglory that can hinder spiritual growth. St. John provides insights on how vainglory manifests in various aspects of life, such as in spiritual practices, interactions with others, and the pursuit of recognition. He warns against the subtle ways vainglory can corrupt intentions and lead to spiritual downfall, stressing the significance of genuine humility and self-awareness.

Transcript

1. Some like to distinguish vainglory from pride and to give it a special place and chapter. And so they say that there are eight capital and deadly sins³. But Gregory the Theologian and other teachers have given out that there are seven; and I am strongly inclined to agree with them. For who that has conquered vainglory has pride within him? The only difference between them is such as there is between a child and a man, between wheat and bread; for the one is the beginning and the other the end. And so now that the occasion calls for it let us speak briefly about the beginning and sum of the

³ Lit. 'thoughts of evil'.

passions, unholy self-esteem. For if anyone were to try to philosophize at length on this subject he would be like someone who fusses over the weight of the winds.

2. With regard to its form, vainglory is a change of nature, a perversion of character, a note of blame. And with regard to its quality, it is a dissipation of labours, a waste of sweat, a betrayal of treasure, a child of unbelief, the precursor of pride, shipwreck in harbour, an ant on the threshing-floor which, though small, has designs upon all one's labour and fruit. The ant waits for the gathering of the wheat, and vainglory for the gathering of the riches of virtue; for the one loves to steal and the other to squander.

3. The spirit of despair rejoices at the sight of increasing vice, and the spirit of vainglory at the sight of increasing virtue. The door of the first is a multitude of wounds, and the door of the second is a wealth of labours.

4. Observe and you will find unholy vainglory abounding till the very grave in clothes, oils, servants, perfumes and the like.

5. The sun shines on all alike, and vainglory beams on all activities. For instance, I am vainglorious when I fast, and when I relax the fast in order to be unnoticed I am again vainglorious over my prudence. When well-dressed I am quite overcome by vainglory, and when I put on poor clothes I am vainglorious again. When I talk I am defeated, and when I am silent I am again defeated by it. However I throw this prickly-pear, a spike stands upright.

6. A vainglorious person is a believing idolater; he apparently honours God, but he wants to please not God but men.

7. Every lover of self-display is vainglorious. The fast of the vainglorious person is without reward and his prayer is futile, because he does both for the praise of men.

8. A vainglorious ascetic is cheated both ways: he exhausts his body, and he gets no reward.

9. Who will not laugh at the vainglorious worker, standing for psalmody and moved by this passion now to laughter and then to tears for all to see?

10. God often hides from our eyes even those perfections that we have obtained. But he who praises us or, rather, misleads us, opens our eyes by his praise, and as soon as our eyes are opened, our treasure vanishes.

11. The flatterer is a servant of devils, a guide to pride, a destroyer of contrition, a ruiner of virtues, a misleader. Those who honour you deceive you, says the prophet.¹

12. People of high spirit bear offence nobly and gladly, but only holy people and saints can pass through praise without harm.

13. I have seen people mourning who, on being praised, flared up in anger; and as at a public gathering one passion gave place to another.

14. Who among men knows the thoughts of a man, except the spirit of the man within him?² And so let those who try to praise us to our face be silent and ashamed.

15. When you hear that your neighbour or friend has abused you behind your back or even to your face, then show love and praise him.

16. It is a great work to shake from the soul the praise of men, but to reject the praise of demons is greater.

¹ Isaiah iii, 12.

² 1 Corinthians ii, 11.

17. It is not he who depreciates himself who shows humility (for who will not put up with himself?) but he who maintains the same love for the very man who reproaches him.
18. I have noticed the demon of vainglory suggesting thoughts to one brother, while he reveals them to another, and he incites the latter to tell the former what is in his heart, and then praises him as a thought reader. And sometimes, unholy creature that he is, he even touches the bodily members and produces palpitations.
19. Do not take any notice of him when he suggests that you should accept a bishopric, or abbacy, or doctorate; for it is difficult to drive away a dog from a butcher's counter.
20. Whenever he sees that any have acquired in some slight measure a contemplative attitude, he immediately urges them to leave the desert for the world, saying: 'Go away in order to save the souls which are perishing.'
21. Ethiopians have one kind of face, and statues another; so too the vainglory of those living in a community takes a different form from that of those living in a desert.
22. Vainglory incites monks given to levity to anticipate the arrival of lay guests and to go out of the cloister to meet them. It makes them fall at their feet and, though full of pride, it feigns humility. It checks manner and voice, and keeps an eye on the hands of visitors in order to receive something from them. It calls them lords and patrons, graced with godly life. To those sitting at table it suggests abstinence, and it rebukes subordinates mercilessly. It stirs those who are slack at standing in psalmody to make an effort; those who have no voice become good singers and the sleepy wake up. It flatters the conductor, and begs to be given first place in the choir; it calls him father and master as long as the guests are still there.
23. Vainglory makes those who are preferred, proud, and those who are slighted, resentful.
24. Vainglory is often the cause of dishonour instead of honour, because it brings great shame to its enraged disciples.
25. Vainglory makes quick-tempered people meek before men.
26. It has great ambition for natural gifts, and through them often hurls its wretched slaves to destruction.
27. I have seen a demon injure and chase off his own brother. For just when a brother had lost his temper, secular visitors suddenly arrived; and the wretched fellow resold himself to vain-glory. He could not serve two passions at the same time.
28. He who has sold himself to vainglory leads a double life. Outwardly he lives with monks, but in mind and thought he is in the world.
29. If we ardently desire to please the Heavenly King, we should be eager to taste the glory that is above. He who has tasted that will despise all earthly glory. For I should be surprised if anyone could despise the latter unless he had tasted the former.
30. Often after being stripped by vainglory, we turn and strip it more cleverly. I have seen some who began spiritual activity out of vainglory, and although they made a bad start, yet the end proved praiseworthy, because they changed their intention.

31. He who is proud of his natural advantages,¹ I mean cleverness, ability to learn, skill in reading, a clear pronunciation, quick understanding and all such gifts received by us without labour, will never

1 There are inclinations which are considered virtues, yet are not, but are really gifts and advantages of nature. Many people are naturally meek, gentle, sober, courageous, modest, chaste, or silent. It is no virtue to be naturally a small eater; but it is a virtue to abstain voluntarily and by choice.

obtain the supernatural blessings, because he who is unfaithful in a little is also unfaithful and vainglorious in much.¹

32. For the sake of extreme dispassion, rich gifts, miracle-working and prophetic powers, many exhaust their bodies in vain. They do not know, poor wretches, that it is not toil so much as humility that is the mother of such perfections.

33. He who asks God for gifts in return for his labours has laid unsure foundations. He who regards himself as a debtor will unexpectedly and suddenly receive riches.

34. Do not believe the winnower when he suggests that you should display your virtues for the benefit of the hearers. For what shall a man be profited if he shall bring profit to the whole world, and forfeit his soul?² Nothing so edifies our neighbour as sincere and humble speech and manners; for this serves as a spur to others never to be puffed-up. And what can be more beneficial than this?

35. One who had the gift of sight told me what he had seen. 'Once,' he said, 'when I was sitting in assembly, the demon of vainglory and the demon of pride came and sat beside me, one on either side. The one poked me in the side with the finger of vain-glory and urged me to relate some vision or labour which I had done in the desert. But as soon as I had shaken him off, saying: Let them be turned back and put to shame who plot evil against me,³ then the demon on my left at once said in my ear: Well done, well done, you have become great by conquering my shameless mother. Turning to him, I made apt use of the rest of the verse and said: Let them be turned back and put to shame who said to me: Well done, well done.⁴ And to my question: How is vainglory the mother of pride? he replied: Praises exalt and puff one up; and when the soul is exalted, then pride seizes it, lifts it up to heaven and casts it down to the abyss.'

36. There is a glory that comes from the Lord, for He says: Those who glorify Me, I will glorify.⁵ And there is a glory that dogs us through diabolic intrigue, for it is said: Woe, when all men shall speak well of you.⁶ You may be sure that it is the first kind of glory when you regard it as harmful and avoid it in every possible way, and hide your manner of life wherever you go. But the other you will know when you do something, however trifling, hoping that you will be observed by men.⁷

37. Abominable vainglory suggests that we should pretend to have some virtue that we do not possess, spurring us on by the text: Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works.⁸

38. The Lord often brings the vainglorious to a state of humility through the dishonour that befalls them.

39. The beginning of the conquest of vainglory is the custody of the mouth and love of being dishonoured; the middle stage is a beating back of all known acts of vainglory; and the end (if there is an end to an abyss) consists in trying to behave in the presence of others so that we are humbled without feeling it.

40. Do not hide your sins with the idea of removing a cause of stumbling from your neighbour; although perhaps it will not be advisable to use this remedy in every case, but it will depend on the nature of one's

sins.

1 St. Luke xvi, 10.

2 St. Matthew xvi, 26; St. Luke ix, 25. 3 Psalm xxxix, 15.

4 Psalm lxi, 3. Cf. xxxix, 16.

5 1 Kings ii, 30.

6 St. Luke vi, 26.

7 St. Matthew vi, 1.

8 St. Matthew v, 16.

41. When we invite glory, or when it comes to us from others uninvited, or when out of vainglory we decide upon a certain course of action, we should remember our mourning and should think of the holy fear with which we stood before God in solitary prayer; and in this way we shall certainly put shameless vainglory out of countenance--if we are really concerned to attain true prayer. If this is insufficient, then let us briefly recollect our death. And if this is also ineffective, at least let us fear the shame that follows honour. For he who exalts himself will be humbled¹ not only there, but certainly here as well.

42. When our praisers, or rather our seducers, begin to praise us, let us briefly call to mind the multitude of our sins, and we shall find ourselves unworthy of what is said or done in our honour.

43. No doubt there are certain prayers of some vainglorious people that deserve to be heard by God; but the Lord has a habit of anticipating their prayers and petitions so that their conceit should not be increased because their prayers have succeeded.

44. Simpler people are not much infected with the poison of vainglory, because vainglory is a loss of simplicity and an insincere way of life.

45. It often happens that when a worm becomes fully grown it gets wings and rises up on high. So too when vainglory increases it gives birth to pride, the origin and consummation of all evils.

46. He who is without this sickness is near to salvation, but he who is not free from it is far from the glory of the Saints.

This is the twenty-second step. He who is not caught by vain-glory will never fall into that mad pride which is so hateful to God.

1 St. Luke xiv, 1

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