

Step 25 on the Destroyer of the Passions, Most Sublime Humility, Which Is Rooted in Spiritual Feeling

by St. John Climacus

Humility is a divine shelter that prevents us from seeing our achievements and is a necessary step towards spiritual growth and self-knowledge.

Scripture: Psalm 25:9, Proverbs 22:4, Matthew 23:12, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 3:12, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Christian Humility", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

St. John Climacus preaches about the profound virtue of humility, describing it as a divine shelter, an abyss of self-abasement, and a strong tower against the enemy. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing one's weaknesses, constantly striving for self-knowledge, and accepting indignity with joy. St. John Climacus highlights that humility leads to spiritual growth, contrition, and a deep sense of unworthiness before God, ultimately guiding individuals to the path of salvation and eternal reward.

Transcript

1. He who thinks that it is possible to use the visible word in order to describe the sensation and effect of the love of the Lord exactly, holy humility gracefully, blessed purity truly, divine enlightenment clearly, the fear of God honestly, assurance of heart sincerely, and imagines that by his description of things of this kind he will enlighten those who have never actually experienced them, is like a man who by words and comparisons wants to give an idea of the sweetness of honey to people who have never tasted it. But just as the latter talks in vain, not to say babbles, so the former either gives the impression of having no experience of what he is talking about, or else has become the mere toy of vainglory.¹

2. This subject sets a treasure before us as a touchstone, preserved in earthen vessels, that is to say in our bodies, and it is of a quality that baffles all description. This treasure has one inscription which is incomprehensible because it comes from above, and those who try to explain it with words give themselves great and endless trouble. And the inscription runs thus: Holy Humility.

3. Let all who are led by the Spirit of God enter with us into this spiritual and wise gathering, holding in their spiritual hands the God-inscribed tablets of knowledge. We have met, we have investigated, and we have probed the meaning of this precious inscription. And one said: 'It means constant oblivion of one's

achievements.' Another: 'It is the acknowledgement of oneself as the last of all and the greatest sinner of all.' And another: 'The mind's recognition of one's weakness and impotence.' Another again: 'In fits of rage it means to forestall one's neighbour and be first to stop the quarrel.' And again another: 'Recognition of divine grace and divine mercy.' And again another: 'The feeling of a contrite soul, and the renunciation of one's own will.' But when I had listened to all this and had attentively and soberly considered it, I found that I had not been able to comprehend the blessed sense of that virtue from what had been said. Therefore, last of all, having gathered what fell from the lips of those learned and blessed fathers as a dog gathers the crumbs that fall from the table, I too gave my definition of it and said: 'Humility is a nameless grace in the soul, its name known only to those who have learned it by experience. It is unspeakable wealth, a name and gift from God, for it is said: Learn not from an angel, not from man, and not from a book, but from Me, that is, from Me indwelling, from My illumination and action in you, for I am meek and humble in heart and in thought and in spirit, and your souls shall find rest from conflicts and relief from arguments.'³

4. The appearance of this sacred vine is one thing during the winter of the passions, another in the spring of fruit-blossom, yet another in the actual harvest of the virtues. Yet all these different stages concur in gladness and fruit-bearing, and therefore they all have their own signs and sure evidence of fruit to come. For as soon as the cluster of holy humility begins to blossom within us, we at once begin, though with an effort, to hate all human glory and praise, and to banish from ourselves irritation and anger. In proportion as this queen of virtues makes progress in our soul by spiritual growth, so we regard all the good deeds accomplished by us as nothing, or rather as an abomination, assuming that

1 St. John Chrysostom says: 'The gifts of God are so great that people can scarcely ever believe it. And it is not surprising if they cannot understand them till they know by experience.' (On 1 Timothy, Homily 4.)

2 I.e. humility.

every day we add more and more to the unknown burden of our dissipation. We suspect the very abundance of the divine gifts showered upon us to be beyond our deserts and to aggravate our punishment. So our mind remains unruffled, reposing securely in the casket of modesty, only hearing the knocks and jeers of the thieves, without being subject to any of their threats; because modesty is an inviolable safe.

5. Thus we have ventured in a few words to philosophize about the blossoming and growth of this ever-flourishing fruit. But what is the perfect reward of this holy virtue? You who are near the Lord must ask the Lord Himself. It is impossible to gauge the quantity of this holy wealth; and to explain its quality is still more impossible. However, as regards its distinguishing characteristics, we must try to express the thought that comes to our mind.

6. Painstaking repentance, mourning cleansed of all impurity, and holy humility in beginners, are as different and distinct from each other as yeast and flour from bread. By open repentance the soul is broken and refined; it is brought to a certain unity, I will even say a commingling with God, by means of the water of genuine sorrow. Then, kindled by the fire of the Lord, blessed humility becomes bread and is made firm without the leaven of pride. Therefore when this holy three-fold cord or, rather, heavenly rainbow, unites into one power and activity, it acquires its own effects and properties. And whatever you name as a sign of one of them, is a token also of another. And so I shall try to prove what I have just said by a brief demonstration.

7. The first and paramount property of this excellent and admirable trinity is the acceptance of indignity with the greatest pleasure, when the soul receives it with outstretched hands and welcomes it as something that relieves and cauterizes diseases of the soul and great sins. The second property is the loss of all bad temper, and modesty at its appeasement. The third and highest degree is a true distrust of one's good qualities and a constant desire to learn.

8. The end of the Law and the Prophets is Christ for the righteousness of every believer.¹ And the end of the impure passions is vainglory and pride for everyone who does not deal with this matter. But their destroyer, this spiritual stag,² keeps him who lives with it immune from all deadly poison. For where can the poison of hypocrisy appear in humility? Where is the poison of calumny? And where will a snake nestle and hide? Will it not rather be drawn out of the earth of the heart and be killed and destroyed?

9. In union with humility it is impossible that there should be any appearance of hatred, or any kind of dispute, or even a sniff of disobedience, unless perhaps faith is called in question.

10. He who has taken humility as his bride is above all gentle, kind, full of compunction, sympathetic, calm, bright, compliant, inoffensive, wide awake, not indolent and (why say more?) free from passion; for the Lord remembered us in our humility, and delivered us from our enemies,³ and our passions and impurities.

11. A humble monk will not meddle with mysteries, but a proud one will pry into judgments.⁴

12. The demons praised one of the most discerning brothers, appearing to him in visible form. But this most wise man said to them: 'If you cease to praise me through the thoughts of my heart, I shall conclude from your departure that I am great. But if you continue to praise me, from your very praise I shall guess my impurity; for every proud-hearted man is unclean before the Lord.⁵ And so either go away from me, and then I shall become great, or else praise me and through you I shall obtain more humility.' Struck with bewilderment, they immediately vanished from sight.

1 1 Romans, X, 4.

2 I.e. humility (Psalm xli, 1). 3 Psalm cxxxv, 23--4.

4 Or, 'the ways of God'.

5 Proverbs xvi, 5.

3 St. Matthew xi, 29.

13. May your soul not be a pond of the river of life, a pond which is sometimes full and sometimes dried up from the heat of glory and exaltation, but may it become a fountain of dispassion ever welling up into a river of poverty.¹

14. Know, beloved, that the valleys shall stand deep in corn² and spiritual fruit. This valley is a soul low and humble among the mountains, that is, it is filled with labours and virtues, and always remains lowly and steadfast. David did not say, 'I have fasted', 'I have kept vigil', or 'I have lain on the bare earth', but 'I humbled myself, and soon the Lord saved me.'³

15. Repentance raises the fallen, mourning knocks at the gate of heaven, and holy humility opens it; but I affirm this and I worship Trinity in Unity, and Unity in Trinity.

16. All visible things get their light from the sun, and all that is done according to reason gets its force from humility. Where there is no light, everything is dark; where there is no humility, all that we have is rotten.

17. In the whole universe there is one place⁴ that has only once seen the sun, and there is one thought⁵ which has often given birth to humility. And there was one day only on which the whole world rejoiced,⁶ and there is one virtue only which the demons cannot imitate.⁷

18. It is one thing to exalt oneself, another not to exalt oneself, and another to humble oneself. One person may be always judging others; another does not judge others, but he does not condemn himself; a third, although he is innocent, is always passing judgment on himself.

19. It is one thing to be humble, another to strive for humility, and another to praise the humble. The first belongs to the perfect, the second to the truly obedient, and the third to all the faithful.

20. He who has humbled himself within will not be cheated by his lips; for what is not in the treasury cannot be brought out through this door.

21. A horse when alone often imagines that it is galloping, but when it is with others it finds out how slow it is.

22. It is a sign of the beginning of health when our thought no longer prides itself on its natural gifts. But as long as it has that stench in its nose,⁸ it cannot detect the fragrance of myrrh.

23. Holy humility said: My lover will not rebuke, or judge, or rule, or display his wisdom, until he has attained union with me. For when he is united with me, the law is no longer applicable to him.⁹

24. The foul fiend whispered praise into the heart of an ascetic who was striving for blessed humility, but by divine inspiration he contrived to conquer the guile of the spirits by a pious ruse. He rose and wrote on the wall of his cell the names of the highest virtues in order, that is: perfect love, angelic humility, pure prayer, inviolable chastity and others like these. And so when thoughts of vainglory began to praise him, he said to them: 'Let us go and be judged.' Then, going to the wall, he read the names and cried to himself: 'When you possess all these, then you will know how far you still are from God!'

25. We cannot describe the power and essence of this sun, humility, but from its properties and effects we can explain its intrinsic nature.

1 Cf. St. Matthew v, 3; St. John, iv, 14. 2 Psalm lxiv, 14.

3 Psalm cxv, 5.

4 I.e. the floor of the Red Sea.

5 Perhaps the thought of death, the last judgement or Christ's Passion.

6 This might be either the day of Christ's Resurrection or of His Nativity. 7 The one virtue inaccessible to the demons is humility.

8 I.e. pride.

9 Cf. 1 Timothy i, 9.

26. Humility is a divine shelter to prevent us from seeing our achievements. Humility is an abyss of self-abasement, inaccessible to any thief. Humility is a strong tower against the face of the enemy.¹ The enemy shall not prevail against him, nor shall the son, or rather, the thought of iniquity do him evil: and he will cut off his enemies from his face and will conquer them that hate him.²

27. Besides all the distinguishing properties indicated above, the great possessor of this wealth also has others in his soul. And all these properties except one are visible signs of this wealth. You will know with certainty that you have this holy possession within you by an abundance of unspeakable light, by an unutterable love for prayer; and before this is attained, by a heart that does not judge the faults of others. And the precursor of what has been said is hatred of all vainglory.

28. He who has got to know himself by discerning each feeling of his soul has sown on earth; but those who have not thus sown cannot expect humility to blossom in them.

29. He who has come to know himself has obtained an understanding of the fear of the Lord; and he who has walked by the aid of this fear, has reached the door of love.

30. Humility is the door of the Kingdom that introduces those who draw near to it. And I think that the Lord was speaking of this door when He said: He shall enter and shall pass out of life without fear, and shall find pasture and green grass in paradise. All who have entered the monastic life by any other door are thieves and robbers of their own life.³

31. We who wish to understand must not cease to examine this. And if our soul is sufficiently perceptive to realize that our neighbour is better in every respect than we are, then the Divine mercy is near us.

32. It is impossible for snow to burst into flame; still more difficult is it for humility to dwell in an unorthodox person. This is something which the pious and faithful achieve, and then only when they have been purified.

33. Most of us call ourselves sinners, and perhaps really think it; but it is indignity that tests the heart.

34. He who is hastening to that tranquil harbour of humility will never cease to do all that he can and will drive himself on by words and thoughts and afterthoughts and various means, by investigations and researches, and by his whole life, by prayers and supplication, meditating and reflection, and using all imaginable means until with God's help and by abiding in humiliations and the most despised conditions and by toils he delivers the ship of his soul from the ever-recurring storms of the sea of vainglory. For he who is delivered from this sin, is easily pardoned all the rest of his sins, like the publican in the Gospel.

35. There are some who all their lives use the bad deeds previously done by them, and for which they had received forgiveness, as a motive for humility, thereby driving out their vain self-esteem. Others, having in mind Christ's passion, regard themselves always as debtors. Others hold themselves cheap for their daily defects. Others as a result of their besetting temptations, infirmities and sins have mortified their pride. Others for want of graces have appropriated the mother of graces (i.e. humility). There are also people (if they still exist) who for the sake of the very gifts of God, in the measure that they receive them, humble themselves and so live as to account themselves unworthy of such wealth, and each day add it to their debt. Such is humility, such is beatitude, such is the perfect reward!

36. When you see or hear that someone has in a few years acquired the most sublime dispassion, then conclude that he travelled by no other way than by this blessed short-cut.

37. A holy team are love and humility; the one exalts, and the other, supporting the exalted ones, never allows it to fall.

1 Psalm lx, 4.

2 Psalm lxxxviii, 23--4. 3 St. John x, 8--9.

38. Contrition is one thing, self-knowledge is another, humility is another.

39. Contrition is the result of a fall. He who falls is crushed and stands in prayer without boldness but with praiseworthy persistence, as one who is shattered, steadying himself with the staff of hope and using it to drive off the dog of despair.

40. Self-knowledge is a true idea of one's spiritual growth and an unbroken remembrance of one's slightest sins.

41. Humility is the spiritual doctrine of Christ which is spiritually received in the closet of the soul by those who are counted worthy of it. It cannot be explained in visible words.

42. He who says that he fully feels the fragrance of such myrrh yet feels, when praised, even a momentary movement of the heart, or understands the force of the words, that man (let him make no mistake about it) is already mistaken.

43. Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give the glory,¹ I heard someone say with heartfelt conviction. For he knew that human nature cannot ordinarily abide in praise without loss. My praise shall be from Thee in the great Church,² that is, in the future life; and before that I cannot accept it without danger to myself.

44. If the limit and rule and characteristic of extreme pride is for a man to feign such virtues as he does not possess for the sake of glory, then it follows that a sign of the deepest humility will be to cheapen ourselves by pretending to have faults that we do not possess. It was in this way that he behaved who took into his hands bread and cheese.³ Likewise the exponent of purity who took off his clothes and, free of passion, went through the whole city.⁴ Such men care nothing for human censure. They have already received invisible power through prayer to reassure all. But he who is anxious about the former will show a lack of the latter.⁵ When God is prepared to attend to our prayer, then we can do anything.

45. It is better to offend men than God. God rejoices when He sees us running to meet dishonour, so as to crush, strike and destroy our vain self-esteem.

46. Such virtues are the effect of flight from the world carried to the highest degree, for only the truly great can bear derision from their own people. Do not be surprised at what is said, for no one can climb a ladder in one stride.

47. By this shall all men know that we are God's disciples,⁶ not because the devils are subject to us, but because our names are written in the heaven of humility.⁷

48. The natural property of the lemon tree is such that it lifts its branches upwards when it has no fruit, but the more the branches bend down the more fruit they bear. Those who have the mind to understand will grasp the meaning of this.

49. Holy humility obtains from God the power to bear fruit thirty fold, sixty fold and one hundredfold.⁸ The dispassionate attain to the last degree, the courageous to the middle, and all can rise to the first.

50. He who has come to know himself is never tricked into undertaking what is beyond him, but keeps his feet safely on the blessed path of humility.

1 Psalm cxiii, 9.

2 Psalm xxi, 26.

3 Abba Symeon, 'Authentic Tales of the Ascetic Labours of the Holy Fathers' (74). 4 Abba Serapion, cf. Palladius, Lausiac History, ch. 72.

5 That is to say, he who is afraid of human criticism will lack power in prayer.

6 St. John xiii, 35.

7 St. Luke x, 20.

8 Cf. St. Matthew xiii, 9.

51. Birds fear the sight of a hawk, and those who practise humility fear the sound of argument.

52. Many have received salvation without prophecies and lights, without signs and wonders; but without humility no one will enter the marriage chamber, because humility is the guardian of these gifts, and without her they will bring frivolous people to ruin.

53. For those of us who do not wish to humble ourselves the Lord has arranged in His providence that no one can see his faults as well as his neighbour does. So we are bound to give thanks for our healing not to ourselves but to our neighbour and to God.

54. The man of humble mind always loathes his own will as wayward, and in his requests to the Lord he studies with unwavering faith to learn and to obey. He does not direct his attention to the life of his masters but casts his care upon God who used an ass to teach Balaam his duty. A worker of this kind, although he does everything and thinks and speaks according to the will of God, yet he never trusts himself. Self-confidence for the humble is just as much a weight and a burden as another man's choice is for the proud.

55. It seems to me that it is the property only of an angel never even secretly to commit sins, for I hear an earthly angel say: I know nothing against myself; yet am I not hereby justified. But He who examines me is the Lord.¹ Therefore we should unceasingly condemn and reproach ourselves so as to cast off involuntary sins through voluntary humiliations. Otherwise, if we do not, at our departure we shall certainly be subjected to heavy punishment.

56. He who asks God for less than his desert will certainly receive more than he deserves. This is demonstrated by the publican who asked for forgiveness but received justification.² And the robber only asked to be remembered in His Kingdom, but he inherited all Paradise.³

57. It is impossible to see fire, small or great, in any natural creature; and it is absolutely impossible that anything of a material nature should be found in sincere humility. As long as we fall into voluntary sins,

there is not this humility in us; and that is the sign that there is still something material in us.

58. The Lord, knowing that the virtue of the soul is modelled on outward behaviour, took a towel⁴ and showed us how to walk the way of humility. For the soul becomes like its bodily occupations. It conforms itself to its activities and takes its shape from them. Sovereignty served as a ground for arrogance for one of the angels, although that was not why it was conferred on him.

59. He who sits on a throne has certain dispositions, and he who sits on a dunghill has others. And that is perhaps why that great saint sat on the dunghill outside the city, for then when he had obtained perfect humility he said with deep feeling: I abhor myself and melt away, and have accounted myself earth and ashes.⁵

60. I find that Manasseh sinned as no other man has sinned by defiling the temple of God with idols and contaminating all the divine worship. If the whole world had undertaken a fast for him it could have made no reparation for this. But humility had power to remedy even what was incurable in him. If Thou hadst desired sacrifice I would have given it, says David to God; but Thou wilt not be pleased with holocausts, that is, with bodies consumed by fasting. The sacrifice for God--and everyone knows what follows.⁶

1 1 Corinthians iv, 4.

2 Cf. St. Luke xviii, 10.

3 Cf. St. Luke xxiii, 43.

4 John xiii, 4.

5 Job xlii, 6.

6 'The sacrifice for God is a contrite spirit; a contrite and humble heart God will not despise' (Psalm l, 17).

61. I have sinned against the Lord, blessed humility once cried to God after committing adultery and murder; and he soon heard: The Lord has put away thy sin.¹

62. The ever-memorable Fathers laid down that the way to humility and its foundations is bodily toil. And I would say obedience and honesty of heart, because they are naturally opposed to self-esteem.

63. If the pride of some of the angels made them demons,² no doubt humility can make angels out of demons. So those who have fallen may take courage!

64. Let us hasten with all our powers to fight our way to the crest of humility. Failing this, let us at least mount on her shoulders. And if our effort is not sufficient for this, let us at least not fall out of her arms; for I hardly think a man who falls out of them will receive any eternal gift.

65. The sinews of humility and its ways, but not its signs, are: poverty, hidden withdrawal from the world, concealment of wisdom, simplicity of speech, asking of alms, hiding of nobility, banishment of familiarity, putting chatter out of court.

66. Nothing can so humble the soul as a state of destitution and a beggar's subsistence. For we only prove to be philosophers and lovers of God when, having the possibility of exaltation, we flee from it irrevocably.

67. If you take up arms against some passion, take humility as an ally, for she will tread upon the asp and basilisk, that is, sin and despair, and will trample underfoot the lion and serpent,³ that is, the devil and the snake of the body.

68. Humility is a heavenly siphon which from the abyss of sins can raise the soul to heaven.

69. Someone saw in his heart the beauty of humility and, seized with amazement, asked her to tell him the name of her parent. Smiling joyfully and serenely at him, humility replied: 'How is it you are in a hurry to know the name of my parent? He is nameless, and I cannot tell you until you possess God.' To Him be the glory for ever and ever! Amen.

The mother of the fountain is the deep sea, and the fountain of discernment is humility.

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