

Step 26 on Discernment of Thoughts, Passions and Virtues

by St. John Climacus

Discernment is the assured understanding of the divine will, developed through the cultivation of virtues and the destruction of passions.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, 1 Corinthians 10:12, Ephesians 6:11, James 4:7, 1 Peter 5:8

Topics: "Spiritual Discernment", "Christian Virtues"

Description

St. John Climacus emphasizes the importance of discernment, which progresses from self-knowledge to spiritual sense and divine illumination, leading to a deep understanding of God's will. He highlights the necessity of purity in heart, body, and speech to attain discernment. St. John also discusses the eradication of passions and the dangers of negligence, pride, and demonic envy in spiritual conflicts. He encourages aligning our actions with our conscience and warns against the traps set by demons to hinder our pursuit of pleasing God.

Transcript

1. Discernment in beginners is true knowledge of themselves; in intermediate souls it is a spiritual sense that faultlessly distinguishes what is truly good from what is of nature and opposed to it; and in the perfect it is the knowledge which they possess by divine illumination, and which can enlighten with its lamp what is dark in others. Or perhaps, generally speaking, discernment is, and is recognized as, the assured understanding of the divine will on all occasions, in every place and in all matters; and it is only found in those who are pure in heart, and in body and in mouth.

2. He who has piously destroyed within him the three passions⁴ has destroyed the five⁵ too; but he who has been negligent about the former will not conquer even one passion.

3. Discernment is undefiled conscience and purity of feeling.

4 Gluttony, cupidity, vainglory.

5 Lust, anger, despair, despondency, pride (St. Gregory of Sinai, ch. 91).

4. Let no one on seeing or hearing something supernatural in the monastic way of life fall into unbelief out of ignorance; for where the supernatural God dwells, much that is supernatural happens.

5. Every satanic conflict in us comes from these three generic causes: either from negligence, or from pride, or from the envy of the demons. The first is pitiable, the second is disastrous, but the third is blessed.

6. After God, let us have our conscience as our aim and rule in all things, so that we may know which way the wind is blowing and set our sails accordingly.

7. In all our actions in which we try to please God the demons dig three pits for us. In the first, they endeavour to prevent any good at all from being done. In the second, after their first defeat, they try to secure that it should not be done according to the will of God. But when these rogues fail in this too, then, standing quietly before our soul, they praise us for living a thoroughly godly life. The first is to be opposed by zeal and fear of death, the second by obedience and humiliation, and the third by unceasing self-condemnation. We shall be faced by toil of this kind until the divine fire enters into our sanctuary.¹ And then the force of bad habit will no longer exist in us. Our God is a fire consuming² all fever (of lust) and movement (of passion), every inclination rooted in us and all blindness and darkness within and without, both visible and spiritual.

8. The demons generally produce in us the opposite of what has just been said. For when they take possession of the soul and extinguish the light of the mind, then there is no longer in us poor wretches either sobriety, or discernment, or self-knowledge or shame; but there is indifference, lack of perception, want of discernment and blindness.

9. What has just been said is known very vividly by those who have subdued their lust in order to become chaste, who have curbed their freedom of speech and have changed from shamelessness to modesty. They know how after the sobering of the mind, after the ending of its blindness, or rather its maiming, they are inwardly ashamed of themselves for what they said and did before when they were living in blindness.

10. If the day in our soul does not draw to evening and grow dark, then the thieves will not come and rob and slay and ruin our soul.

11. Robbery is loss of property. Robbery is doing what is not good as if it were good. Robbery is unobserved captivity of the soul. The slaying of the soul is the death of the rational mind that has fallen into nefarious deeds. Ruin is despair of oneself following on breach of the law.

12. Let no one plead his incapacity to fulfil the commandments of the Gospel, for there are souls who have gone even beyond the commandments. And you will certainly be convinced of what has been said by him who loved his neighbour more than himself and laid down his life for him, although he had not received this commandment from the Lord.³

13. Those who have been humbled by their passions may take courage. For even if they fall into every pit and are trapped in all the snares and suffer all maladies, yet after their restoration to health they become physicians, beacons, lamps, and pilots for all, teaching us the habits of every disease and from their own personal experience able to prevent their neighbours from falling.

14. If some are still dominated by their former bad habits, and yet can teach by mere word, let them teach. But they should not have authority as well. For, perhaps, being put to shame by their own words, they will eventually begin to practise what they preach. And even if they do not begin, yet they may be able to help, as I saw happen with others who were stuck in the mud. Boggled down as they were, they were telling the

passers-by how they had sunk there, explaining this for their salvation, so

1 Psalm lxxvi, 16.

2 Hebrews xii, 23.

3 Abba Leo, who redeemed three captives. See John Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale*, ch. 111

that they should not fall in the same way. However, for the salvation of others, the all-powerful God delivered them too from the mud. But if those who are possessed by passions voluntarily plunge into pleasures, let them teach by silence; for Jesus began both to do and to teach.¹

15. Perilous, truly perilous is the sea that we humble monks are crossing, a sea in which there are many winds, rocks, whirlpools, pirates, hurricanes, shallows, monsters and waves. A rock in the soul we may consider to be fierce and sudden anger. A whirlpool is hopelessness which seizes the mind and strives to drag it to the depths of despair. A shallow is ignorance which accepts what is bad as good. A monster is this heavy and savage body. Pirates are the most dangerous servants of vainglory who rifle our cargo and the hard-won earnings of the virtues. A wave is a swollen and burdened stomach which by its greed hands us over to the beast. A hurricane is pride that casts us down from heaven, that carries us up to the sky and then down to the abyss.

16. Those engaged in education know what studies are suitable for beginners, what for the intermediate and what for teachers. Let us take sensible precautions not to prolong our study and stop in the beginners' lessons. For to see an old man going to a children's school is a great disgrace.

17. Here is an excellent alphabet for all:

(A) obedience

(B) fasting

(C) sackcloth

(D) ashes

(E) tears

(F) confession

(G) silence

(H) humility

(I) vigil

(J) courage

(K) cold

(L) toil

(M) hard work

(N) humiliation

(O) contrition

(P) forgetfulness of wrongs (Q) brotherly love

(R) meekness

(S) simple and unquestioning faith (T) freedom from worldly cares (U) hateless hatred of parents

(V) detachment

(X) innocent simplicity

(Z) voluntary abasement

18. A good scheme for the advanced, and evidence of their progress is: absence of vainglory, freedom from anger, good hope, silence, discernment, firm remembrance of the judgment, compassion, hospitality, moderation in reproof, passionless prayer, disregard of self.

1 Acts i, 1.

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