

Step 3 on Exile or Pilgrimage

by St. John Climacus

Exile or pilgrimage is a means of separating from worldly attachments and attachments to relatives or strangers, in order to focus on spiritual growth and detachment.

Scripture: Matthew 12:49, Luke 4:24, Luke 9:23, Romans 14:12, 1 Corinthians 15:33

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Humility"

Description

St. John Climacus preaches about the concept of exile as leaving behind everything that hinders us from reaching spiritual goals, emphasizing the virtues of modesty, wisdom, prudence, hidden intentions, and a desire for humility. He warns against excessive exile that may lead to vainglory and the importance of discretion in such practices. Exile is described as separation from worldly attachments to keep the mind focused on God, leading to continuous weeping and detachment from personal and worldly desires.

Transcript

1. Exile means that we leave forever everything in our own country that prevents us from reaching the goal of the religious life. Exile means modest manners, wisdom which remains unknown, prudence not recognized as such by most, a hidden life, an invisible intention, unseen meditation, desire for humiliation, longing for hardship, constant determination to love God, abundance of charity, renunciation of vainglory, depth of silence.
2. Those who have come to love the Lord are at first unceasingly and greatly disturbed by this thought, as if burning with divine fire. I speak of separation from their own, undertaken by the lovers of perfection so that they may live a life of hardship and simplicity. But great and praiseworthy as this is, yet it requires great discretion; for not every kind of exile, carried to extremes, is good.
3. If every prophet goes unhonoured in his own country,³ as the Lord says, then let us beware lest our exile should be for us an occasion of vainglory. For exile is separation from everything in order to keep the mind inseparable from God. Exile loves and produces continual weeping. An exile is a fugitive from every attachment to his own people and to strangers.
4. In hastening to solitude and exile, do not wait for world-loving souls, because the thief comes unexpectedly. In trying to save the careless and indolent along with themselves, many perish with them, because in course of time the fire goes out. As soon as the flame is burning within you, run; for you do not know when it will go out and leave you in darkness. Not all of us are required to save others. The divine

Apostle says: 'Each one of us shall give account of himself to God.'⁴ And again he

2 This is a double translation for a single Greek word *xeniteia* which means 'living as a stranger' (not necessarily as a vagrant) and might be translated 'unworldliness'. But several considerations, notably paragraphs 6 and 22 of this chapter, have led me to think that in our author's time the word contained a notion of movement also, and might be rendered 'pilgrimage'. However, in the text we have kept to the word 'exile'.

3 St. John iv, 44.

4 Romans xiv, 12.

says: 'Thou therefore who teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?'¹ This is like saying: I do not know whether we must all teach others; but teach yourselves at all costs.

5. In going into exile, beware of the demon of wandering and of sensual desire; because exile gives him his opportunity.

6. Detachment is excellent; but her mother is exile. Having become an exile for the Lord's sake, we should have no ties of affection at all lest we seem to be roving in order to gratify our passions.

7. Have you become an exile from the world? Do not touch the world any more; because the passions desire nothing better than to return.

8. Eve was exiled from Paradise against her will, but the monk is a willing exile from his home. She would have liked the tree of disobedience again; and he would certainly expose himself to frequent danger from relatives according to the flesh.

9. Run from places of sin as from the plague. For when fruit is not present, we have no frequent desire to eat it.

10. Be on the look out for this trick and wile of the thieves. For they suggest to us that we need not separate ourselves from people in the world and maintain that we shall receive a great reward if we can look upon women and still remain continent. We must not believe these suggestions, but rather the opposite.

11. When we have lived a year or two away from our family, and have acquired some piety or contrition or continence, then vain thoughts begin to rise up in us and urge us to go again to our homeland, 'for the edification of many', they say, 'and as an example, and for the profit of those who saw our former lax life'. And if we possess the gift of eloquence and some shreds of knowledge, the thought occurs to us that we could be saviours of souls and teachers in the world--that we may waste in the sea what we have gathered so well in the harbour. Let us try to imitate not Lot's wife, but Lot himself. For when a soul turns back to what it has left, like salt, it loses its savour and becomes henceforth useless. Run from Egypt without looking back; because the hearts which look back upon it with affection shall not see Jerusalem, the land of tranquility.² Those who left their own people in childlike simplicity at the beginning, and have since been completely purified may profitably return to their former land, perhaps even with the intention, after saving themselves, of saving others, too. Yet Moses, who was allowed to see God Himself and was sent by God for the salvation of his own people, met many dangers in Egypt, that is to say, dark nights in the world.

12. It is better to grieve our parents than the Lord. For He has created and saved us, but they have often ruined their loved ones and delivered them up to their doom.

13. He is an exile who, having knowledge, sits like one of foreign speech amongst people of another tongue.

14. It is not from hatred that we separate ourselves from our own people or places (God forbid!), but to avoid the harm which might come to us from them. In this, as in everything else, it is Christ who teaches us what is good for us. For it is clear that He often left His parents according to the flesh. And when He was told, 'Thy Mother and Thy brethren are seeking for Thee', our good Lord and Master at once showed us an example of dispassionate³ hatred when He said, 'My Mother and My brethren are they who do the will of My Father who is in heaven'.⁴

¹ Romans ii, 21.

² 'Dispassion', Gk. apatheia. Jerusalem means 'City of Peace'. The only true peace is freedom from passion, and the technical word for this is 'dispassion'.

³ apathes, i.e. free from human emotions and feelings. ⁴ St. Matthew xii, 49.

15. Let him be your father who is able and willing to labour with you in bearing the burden of your sins; and your mother--contrition, which can cleanse you from impurity; and your brother--your comrade who toils and fights side by side with you in your striving toward the heights. Acquire an inseparable wife--the remembrance of death. And let your beloved children be the sighs of your heart. Make your body your slave; and your friends, the Holy Powers (Angels) who can help you at the hour of your death, if they become your friends. This is the generation (family) of those who seek the Lord.¹

16. Love of God extinguishes our love for our parents. And so he who says that he has both deceives himself. He should listen to Him who says: No man can serve two masters.² I have not come, says the Lord, to bring peace on earth (that is, love of parents among sons and brothers who have resolved to serve Me) but war and a sword³ in order to separate lovers of God from lovers of the world, the material from the spiritual, the proud from the humble. For strife and separation delight the Lord when they spring from love for Himself.

17. Look, beware, lest you be exposed to the deluge of sentiment through your attachment to the things of your home, and all that you have be drowned in the waters of earthly affection. Do not be moved by the tears of parents or friends; otherwise you will be weeping eternally. When they surround you like bees, or rather wasps, and shed tears over you, do not for one moment hesitate, but sternly fix the eye of your soul on your past actions and your death, that you may ward off one sorrow by another. Our own, or more correctly, those who are not our own, flatteringly promise to do everything to please us. But their aim is to hinder our splendid course, and afterwards to bend us in this way to their own ends.

18. For our solitary life let us choose places where there are fewer opportunities for comfort and ambition, but more for humility. Otherwise, we shall be fleeing in company with our passions.

19. Hide your noble birth and do not glory in your distinction, lest you be found to be one thing in word and another in deed.

20. No one has gone into exile so nobly as that great patriarch⁴ to whom it was said: 'Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house.'⁵ And then he was ordered to go into a foreign and barbarous land.

21. Sometimes the Lord has brought more glory to the man who has gone into exile after the manner of this great patriarch. But even if glory is God-given, yet it is excellent to divert it from oneself with the shield of humility.

22. When men or devils praise us for our exile, as for some great success, then let us think of Him who for our sake was exiled from heaven to earth, and we shall find that throughout all eternity it is impossible for us to make return for this.

23. Attachment either to some particular relative or to strangers is dangerous. Little by little it can entice us back to the world, and completely quench the fire of our contrition. It is impossible to look at the sky with one eye and at the earth with the other, and it is equally impossible for anyone not to expose his soul to danger who has not separated himself completely, both in thought and body, from his own relatives and from others.

24. By much labour and effort a good and firm disposition is developed in us. But what is achieved with great labour can be lost in an instant. 'For evil company doth corrupt good manners'⁶, being at once worldly and disorderly.⁷ The man who associates with people of the world or approaches them

1 Psalm xxiii, 6.

2 St. Matthew vi, 24.

3 St. Matthew x, 34.

4 Abraham.

5 Genesis xii, 1.

6 1 Corinthians xv, 33.

7 'Worldly and disorderly', a pun on kosmos, 'world' and akosmos, 'disorder'.

after his renunciation will certainly either fall into their traps or will defile his heart by thinking about them; or if he is not defiled himself yet by condemning those who are defiled, he too will himself be defiled.

Concerning dreams that beginners have

25. It is impossible to hide the fact that our mind, which is the organ of knowledge, is extremely imperfect and full of all kinds of ignorance. The palate distinguishes different foods, the hearing discerns thoughts, the sun reveals the weakness of the eyes, and words betray a soul's ignorance. But the law of love is an incentive to attempt things that are beyond our capacity. And so I think (but I do not dogmatize) that after a chapter on exile, or rather in this very chapter, something should be inserted about dreams, so that we may not be in the dark concerning this trickery of our wily foes.

26. A dream is a movement of the mind while the body is at rest. A phantasy is an illusion of the eyes when the intellect is asleep. A phantasy is an ecstasy of the mind when the body is awake. A phantasy is

the appearance of something which does not exist in reality.

27. The reason why we have decided to speak about dreams here is obvious. When we leave our home and relatives for the Lord's sake, and sell ourselves into exile for the love of God, then the devils try to disturb us with dreams, representing to us that our relatives are either grieving or dying, or are captive for our sake and destitute. But he who believes in dreams is like a person running after his own shadow and trying to catch it.

28. The demons of vainglory prophesy in dreams. Being unscrupulous, they guess the future and foretell it to us. When these visions come true, we are amazed; and we are indeed elated with the thought that we are already near to the gift of foreknowledge. A demon is often a prophet to those who believe him, but he is always a liar to those who despise him. Being a spirit he sees what is happening in the lower air, and noticing that someone is dying, he foretells it to the more credulous types of people through dreams. But the demons know nothing about the future from foreknowledge. For if they did, then the sorcerers would also have been able to foretell our death.

29. Devils often transform themselves into angels of light and take the form of martyrs, and make it appear to us during sleep that we are in communication with them. Then, when we wake up, they plunge us into unholy joy and conceit. But you can detect their deceit by this very fact. For angels reveal torments, judgments and separations; and when we wake up we find that we are trembling and sad. As soon as we begin to believe the devils in dreams, then they make sport of us when we are awake, too. He who believes in dreams is completely inexperienced. But he who distrusts all dreams is a wise man. Only believe dreams that foretell torments and judgment for you. But if despair afflicts you, then such dreams are also from devils.

This is the third step, which is equal in number to the Trinity. He who has reached it, let him not look to the right hand nor to the left.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/st-john-climacus/step-3-on-exile-or-pilgrimage/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net